

A black and white photograph of a man's head and shoulders in profile, facing left. He has short, dark hair and is wearing a dark, textured jacket. The background is a weathered brick wall with some peeling plaster. Overlaid on the lower half of the image is the word "NOOSPHERIA" in a large, white, stylized, handwritten-style font.

NOOSPHERIA



ANOBIUM

VOLUME 3

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“The Gospel According to Peanut Butt,”

selected from *Blaster: The Blaster Al Ackerman Omnibus*

by Blaster “Al” Ackerman (Pointe-Claire, Quebec: Feh! Press).

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NOOSPHERIA

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MASS INTEREST, FREE THOUGHT

AN INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITOR
BY “MARY J. LEVINE”

Noospheria (ˈnəʊˌsfɪə) - n. *cosmology*: a fragment of the universe that is enacted by human thought, culture, and knowledge.

—*Combined English Dictionary & Encyclopedia of ‘Pataphysics*. 6th ed. 1995.

Here a new riddle has arisen before us. Thought is not a form of energy. How then can it change material processes? [...] As for the coming of the noosphere, we see around us at every step the empirical results of that “incomprehensible” process.

—Vladimir Vernadsky, *The Biosphere and the Noosphere*, *American Scientist*, January 1945

I told Laika that our children are the only possessions we can take to heaven, but he was confused if I meant our children, or just children in general.

—R. Dower, *My Year With The Space Dog*

It’s an ugly word: noosphere. Phonetically, know-us-fear. Could also read noose-fear, which is partly what lends to the ugliness of the thing. But it’s something I treat—like most words—as a placeholder, or a description adequate for the time being. Examples of other words I consider placeholders are: ferrofluid, monological, algebra, and husbandry.

In his time, Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky (1863–1945) was considered by some to be a scientist battling the same RBI as Darwin, though outside of history-of-science fanboys, you’d

be hard-pressed to find Vernadsky's cause touted in any serious way. His books are the dusty sort you find stacked three rows back in the science section at your used book store. Little decaying artifacts of the modern scientific legacy, which fetishizes innovation and confuses it for certainty.

Much to his historical detriment, Vernadsky wasn't a paying member of the Cult of Empiricism—the sort of enrollment taken to be granted by his more venerated contemporaries and successors. He was more cosmic than that. Think Asimov over Einstein.

Among his other accomplishments, which included research and development in mineralogy, geochemistry, biogeochemistry, and radiogeology, Vernadsky was also a champion of the 'biosphere,' an idea he inherited from Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) and Edward Suess (1831–1914), which suggests that, "Mankind, as living matter, is inseparably connected with the material-energetic processes of a specific geological envelope of the Earth." This envelope Vernadsky calls the biosphere, and as he goes on to say, "Mankind cannot be physically independent of the biosphere for a single minute."

This sort of holistic thinking is now grounded firmly in the realm of common sense, though many treat the idea of the biosphere as a sort of Supreme Analogue. While I see the sense in giving the biosphere a deity treatment, to do so is a bit like seeing the trees for the forest. There's another god in the picture, or at least another god constituting the picture, and this is where we start nearing the gateway to the noosphere.

I first proposed noospheria as a theme for V3 at an editors meeting in December 2011. We were sitting around a table at a bar called Carola's Hansa Clipper on the north side of Chicago. It was a weekday night, unseasonably warm, and I was sipping an Echte Kroatzberg to honor the Teutonic spirit of the joint. There were a few other people at the bar; solitary, working-class folk. The song 'You Get What You Give' by New Radicals came on in the jukebox. Some of us nodded, smirking at the unspoken 'remember whens' that pop up whenever a forgotten top-40-radio-music artifact is unearthed.

The song is from *Maybe You've Been Brainwashed Too* (1998, MCA), an hour-long, 13-track pop-rock joy-ride, decrying the abuses of Western commercialism and materialism, infused with occasional moments of suburban optimism and gen-X felicity. It's one of many rhetorical contributions to the late 1990's pop-counter-culture dialectic, before social criticism entirely devolved into irony, self-parody, and mass-produced Che Guevara t-shirts.

On the other hand, you wonder: when Gregg Alexander accepted the \$600,000 advance for the album, was his tongue in his cheek?

'You Get What You Give' starts with a simple drums + acoustic guitar + piano + delayed guitar effect, and after a 1-2-3-4 count off, we're launched completely into the song space, where the second guitar and bass kick in. It's an upbeat song with a positive chord progression, describing microcosmic scenes of afternoon anarchy and materialist disenchantment. Bolstered by jovial lyrical assurances ("But when the night is falling / and you cannot find the light / if you feel your dream is dying / hold tight / you've got the music in you"), the chorus, marked by a sunny, arena-rock echo, encourages:

*Don't let go
you've got the music in you
one dance left
this world is gonna pull through
don't give up
you've got a reason to live
can't forget
we only get what we give*

It's a feel-good song. Something teenagers blasted when they got the blues for getting dumped, cheated on, or grounded for smoking weed. You get the impression that Alexander has endured life's middle-class trials and that his is the voice of experience. Maybe he even has a misdemeanor for truancy?

However, amidst the song's bright optimism, you get the impression that a more sardonic repartee is lying just under the surface. This is due less to the song's various anti-corporate jabs and more to its insistent positivity. In 'You Get What You Give,' the world is in its twilight stage (one dance left). There is millennial paranoia here, as well as a sort of Ecclesiastical 'last call,' as if the temporality of things begets the meaningfulness of things.

I had never given the song much thought. It was a half-popped kernel of carmel-coated popcorn, and nothing more. But when the song came on that night at the Clipper, it was paired with an *a-ha* moment. I had just wrapped up a poor explanation of the noosphere and the way it relates to Anobium, literature, and art in general. When New Radicals kicked on, without meaning to, we sidled our editorial conversation to reminisce about the '90s: high school, skateboarding, back seat frolics, underage drinking. I had a lucid visualization of how our conversation looked. I was already two drinks deep on an empty stomach, so this might have had something to do with it, but still, it was a very real picture:

There were the three of us sitting around a table in this dim, hole-in-the-wall bar. We were having a conversation held within the context of this physical environment, though the way we appropriated this environment was itself determined by our conversation. There would be jokes, agreements, and disagreements in our conversation, and all of these things would be taken for granted as sensible within this context. This context, which is enacted by human interchange, is the noosphere. As R. Dower once said, "There's no point in asking 'is this my hand?' if this is indeed my hand." Like Vernadsky says of the biosphere—with which the noosphere shares many of its attributes—if we were to be extracted from this space, or this space extracted from us, our conversation and language would be altered, or—at worst—rendered totally insensible.

Physical environment is primarily characterized by what we can sense (The walls are made of cheap wood panelling, the floors are sticky with spilled beer, the door to the bathroom swings on squeaky hinges, etc.), the precedence or priority of senses are determined by what we can call—for the sake of conversation—that "incomprehensible" process.

For this—among other things—we had the warm December weather, whose effects on the Chicago psyche are difficult, if not violent. And then there was the way the bartender raised his left eyebrow when I asked him if he had any Belgian-style beers; a gesture I interpreted to mean, “This is a German bar and you should know better.” And then there was the appearance of the New Radicals and my latent realization about how the song is a paean to late-century nihilism. These were the ways the things that were happening were being made sensible to me (note: passive voice). How many other unknown things was I experiencing, and how could I assess if my way of making sense of one thing, like a New Radicals song, wasn’t my way of trying to make sense of a more “incomprehensible” thing?

These are pre-revelatory questions, bred within the space of the noosphere. For example: Discordianism, a religion based on the worship of Eris, was founded in 1958 by Malaclypse the Younger (Gregory Hill, 1941-2000) and Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst (Kerry Wendell Thornley, 1938-1998) when they experienced a shared hallucination at a bowling alley in in Whittier, California. Similarly affected by foreign substances, and likewise challenged by these pre-revelatory questions, Malaclypse and Ravenhurst neared the precipice of the “incomprehensible” and articulated a cosmic conception from the experience.

While Discordianism plays like an intellectual satire of religion, it culls inspiration from the same “incomprehensible” context as more mainstream religions, which are themselves attempts to resolve the insoluble nature of the noosphere. In this sense, there is no difference between religion and religious satire. All of them are unable to define (or confine) the dimensions and conditions of their context. At best—in the spirit of the noosphere—they can make suppositions, but they are fooling themselves if they think they can make any declarations. Religion is a placeholder. I can talk about New Radicals all I want (which is not much more than I already have), but it would be fallacious of me to argue that New Radicals should *mean* anything. It’s there, here’s what I think of it, and here’s how I think it’s affecting the situation: but even then, I can’t really be sure. Call me Pop-Agnostic.

At The Clipper, I realized that while I was talking about all of these things, I was really talking about the noosphere, or the concept ‘noosphere’ as something adequate *for the time being*. It’s a neologism derived from the Greek νοῦς (nous, “mind”) and σφαῖρα (sphaira, “sphere”), and while Vernadsky did well to articulate it, he relied too heavily on the biosphere as the analogue for the noosphere, and not the other way around. At the very least, however, Vernadsky had the context right. The noosphere is a child of history. He begins his essay, *The Biosphere and the Noosphere*, by announcing the impending climax of the Second World War—itsself a continuation of the First World War—“which resulted in a new, historically unprecedented, form of statehood, not only in the realm of economics, but likewise in that of the aspirations nationalities.”

He continues, arguing that, “From the point of view of the naturalist (and, I think, likewise from that of the historian) an historical phenomenon of such power may and should be examined as a part of a single great terrestrial geological process, and not merely as a historical

process.”

History is not merely historical, in other words. It develops in much the same way terra develops, via something Vernadsky calls ‘the Huyghens principle,’ which, quoting scientist Christian Huyghens (1629–1695), posits that, “life is a cosmic phenomenon, *in some way sharply distinct from nonliving matter*.” History, the story of life, advances in some way, some “incomprehensible” way. Vernadsky was writing in a scientific age where cosmic conjecture was still permissible, even going so far to cite Goethe (1740–1832). Of him, Vernadsky writes that Goethe was, “not only a great poet but a great scientist as well, [who] once rightly remarked, in science we only can know how something occurred, but we cannot know why it occurred.”

Further bearing the liquid nature of history in mind, Vernadsky writes:

“The historical process is being radically changed under our very eyes. For the first time in the history of mankind the interests of the masses on the one hand, and the free thought of individuals on the other, determine the course of life of mankind and provide standards for mere ideas of justice. [...] The noosphere is a new geological phenomenon on our planet. In it for the first time man becomes a large-scale geological force. He can and must rebuild the province of his life by his work and thought, rebuild it radically in comparison with the past. Wider and wider creative possibilities open before him.”

While Vernadsky was correct in utilizing the noosphere as a conceptual tool to describe the development of the ‘large-scale geological’ events throughout the 20th century, it would be a disservice to the spirit of the noosphere to continue upholding it as a mere descriptor. Since the appearance of the noosphere, not only has history been affected by a growing human influence, but an expanding technological, commercial, and communicative influence. For this reason, I prefer Jan Benes’ (1957–) recapitulation of the concept in his entry on Vernadsky in the *Combined English Dictionary & Encyclopedia of ‘Pataphysics* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), where he gives the noosphere a proper noun treatment (not unlike the god treatment). The noosphere becomes ‘Noospheria,’ which is both more universal and more Heraclitean—cosmic definition and all: “*a fragment of the universe that is enacted by human thought, culture, and knowledge*.”

Benes writes, “We are always in Noospheria, though sometimes more than others.” The idea of a precipice is jettisoned and we are left wholly consumed by the “incomprehensible.” My experience at the Clipper, was an experience in Noospheria. Whereas the former ‘noosphere’ allowed for a distinction between the real and the irreal (a result of Vernadsky’s scientific background), Noospheria shatters that demarcation. “There is only incomprehension in Noospheria,” Benes says. “If I am to radically ‘rebuild the province of my life,’ I first need to recognize the priority of incomprehension.”

To avoid falling straight into the pit of existentialism, Benes is also careful to note that despite the universal incomprehension of Noospheria, things still remain sensible. Incorporating

Vernadsky’s promise that ‘wider creative possibilities’ will be opened, Benes suggests that creativity is essential for navigating incomprehensibility. “Incomprehensibility is not a curse, it is a fact,” Benes says. “While Art is not always comprehensible, it is always sensible—and this is what we should embrace; this is the new domain of creative possibility.”

(And the pitch:) *Anobium: Volume 3—Noospheria* is our way of capturing this. Think of this book as a noospheric documentary. For this volume, we’ve hand-selected various writings, essays, and interviews we feel represent Noospheria. The difficulty, of course, is that everything is noospheric, though — to play on Benes — some things are more noospheric than others.

Unlike *Volume 1* and *Volume 2*, which published writings submitted via our open submissions invitation, the writings here have been mostly hand-selected and cooperatively developed. **Timothy Schuler**’s essay, *Commonplaces*, was formulated over pint glasses (at The Clipper, no less), and uses the idea of ‘Commonplace’ books to discuss the myth of literary ownership. **Caroline Picard**’s essay, *Bound With Bright, Beautiful Things*, was first pitched as a small web essay, but grew into a different creature over time, with proprietary illustrations to match. We’re also including three separate, long-form interviews with **Bruce Bickford** (sculptor/artist), **John M. Bennett** (poet/artist), and **Adam Levin** (fiction author), which—based on their content and rhythm—I consider to be cornerstones for this collection. **Graham Tugwell** and **Jonathan Greenhouse**, both of whom were published in *Volume 1* and *Volume 2*, are included again here, stellar as always. **D.E. Steward**, who we published in *Volume 2*, shows up here again as well. New to *Anobium*—though not new to the writing world—are contributions from authors **Brandi Wells**, **Benjamin Schachtman**, **Daniel Carter**, **Cassandra Seltman**, **Benjamin Merriman**, and **Lauren Goodman**. Also, in the true spirit of Noospheria, we are including collaborative pieces from **Kathleen Rooney/Elisa Gabbert**, **Quinton Hallett/Colette Jonopulos/Nancy Carol Moody/Laura LeHew**, and a **Toshiya Kamei**-translated piece originally authored by Mexican writer **Julieta García González** (1970–). **Blaster “Al” Ackerman** also makes an appearance here, in a piece republished from his omnibus collection, printed by Feh! in 1994.

What you hold here in your hands is an actual fragment of the universe enacted by human thought, culture, and knowledge—or lack thereof. It’s a noospheric mix tape. It once was not, but is now, and soon, will not be. As Vernadsky says, “Therefore we may face the future with confidence. It is in our hands. We will not let it go.” Enjoy it. I know do, or at least, my reading of it conjures a feeling of enjoyment, which is suitable *for the time being*, but I can only peel the crust off so many sandwiches before my time is up. Huyghens be with you (and also with you).

- MJL

Wm. W. W. W.

ENTATION

COMMON PLACES

BY TIMOTHY A. SCHULER

“We don’t come to thoughts. They come to us.”

—Martin Heidegger

“Always read with a pen in hand.”

—Mandy Brown

If plagiarism could be considered a criminal offense—as is the theft of other things: automobiles, identities—this is how things would’ve played out inside a courthouse in Brooklyn in 2007, during a case involving an essay published in the February issue of *Harper’s* magazine, the prosecution alleging eighty counts of plagiarism: The plaintiffs, whom included Saul Bellow, William Gibson, David Foster Wallace, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mary Shelley, Dizzy Gillespie, Roland Barthes, Mark Twain, Brian Wilson, David Shields, Harry Truman, Sandra Day O’Connor and fifty-some others, were not in attendance. Most were dead. The state-appointed attorney argued passionately for their posthumous rights. In what is typically a fatal decision, the defendant chose to forgo legal counsel and defend himself. When it came time, he entered

into evidence the same essay that had been brought against him—twenty-eight pages of stolen words and phrases, burglarized sentences and sentiments—and rested.

The essay, “The Ecstasy of Influence,” plagiarized to prove the value of plagiarism, its beauty and inevitability. And its construction, using borrowed words to legitimize the art of borrowing, earned Jonathan Lethem, the author, a verdict of Not Guilty. “The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of all human utterances—is plagiarism,” Lethem wrote. “For substantially all ideas are secondhand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources and daily used by the garnerer with a pride and satisfaction born of the superstition that he originated them: whereas there is not a rag of originality about them anywhere.” These words, of course, aren’t Lethem’s, but lifted from a book by Siva Vaidhyanathan...though they aren’t his either. They’re Mark Twain’s, taken from a letter Twain wrote to Hellen Keller, who’d been accused of plagiarism in her own writing. Lethem listed each theft in a “key” that was published at the end of the essay. Behind the key was another key, citing all those authors who, long before Lethem, had plagiarized with intention. Graham Rawle. Eduardo Paolozzi. David Edelstein.

One of the writers given credit was David Shields, still three years away from completing his own great plagiarism. *Reality Hunger* took Lethem’s idea and turned it into a 300-page manifesto. Shields battled Random House for the right to publish the book without any citations. He lost, writing in the appendix, “I’m trying to regain a freedom that writers from Montaigne to Burroughs took for granted that we have lost. [...] If you would like to restore this book to the form in which I intended it to be read, simply grab a sharp pair of scissors or a razor blade or box cutter and remove pages 210-218 by cutting along the dotted line. Who owns the words? Who owns the music and rest of our culture? We do—all of us—though not all of us know it yet. Reality cannot be copyrighted.”

* * *

To ask who owns an idea is to ask about its origins, to take the elevator all the way down to the floor marked Theories of Creativity in Literary History, where the archives are only open Tuesdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and the employees are grayed from numerous deficiencies. Yet the writer perhaps best suited to answer the question is not a literary theorist or cultural historian, but a journalist.

Steven Johnson, compiling a natural history of innovation, writes that “one of the most remarkable patterns in intellectual history” is the phenomenon scholars now call “the multiple.” “Sunspots were simultaneously discovered in 1611 by four scientists living in four different countries,” he writes. “Joseph Priestly and Carl Wilhelm Scheele independently isolated oxygen between 1772 and 1774. ... The telephone, telegraph, steam engine, photograph vacuum tube, radio—just about every essential technological advance of modern life has a multiple lurking somewhere in its origin story. [...] Good ideas are not conjured out of thin air; they are built out of a collection of existing parts.”

The existing parts Diana Wagman needed to write “Three-Legged Dog” didn’t exist fifty years ago. “My girlfriend is missing her left breast,” the short story begins. “She has a horizontal scar across half her chest, like the seam of a pocket that holds her heart. She had cancer before I met her. I don’t mind. I once went with a girl who had multiple labia piercings and that was more annoying. This is kind of cool.” It’s a story that wasn’t possible half a century ago. It relies both on a less Puritanical public—what year would it have become acceptable to discuss Anne Boleyn’s “tits”?—and the ubiquity of cancer, a disease Wagman treats not as the climax or even the presenting problem but as the story’s basic landscape. It’s a twenty-first-century story not just thematically, but technologically. Published in *Electric Literature Volume 1*, “Three-Legged Dog” was primarily accessible through media that ten years ago didn’t exist: iPhones, iPads, Kindles, Nooks, delivered to a reader’s Downloads folder with an extension like .modi or .epub.

Because we’re less shocked with likening chemo to a fifty-thousand-dollar Brazilian wax, and because publishers are increasingly resigned to the importance, or at least the viability of digital media, Wagman’s story entered what theoretical biologist Stuart Kauffman calls *the adjacent possible*. “The phrase captures both the limits and the creative potential of change and innovation,” Johnson writes. “In the case of prebiotic chemistry, the adjacent possible defines all those molecular reactions that were directly achievable in the primordial soup. Sunflowers and mosquitoes and brains exist outside that circle of possibility. What the adjacent possible tells us is that at any moment the world is capable of extraordinary change, but only *certain* changes can happen.” Wagman’s story entered the adjacent possible when we began writing more freely of sexual experience and terminal illness, and when we began doing so outside the typical publishing apparatuses of paper and ink.

Lethem opened “Ecstasy” with the story of two Lolitas, Vladimir Nabokov’s famous story, published in 1947, and Heinz von Eschwege’s far less famous one, published in 1916. In both, a middle-aged man becomes sexually obsessed with a prepubescent girl. In both, that girl’s name is Lolita. Michael Maar and others have argued that the case is one of cryptomnesia, a condition in which an experience is subsumed and later surfaces not as a memory but as original thought. Supposed cases include Nietzsche’s appropriation of a passage from a childhood book and Robert Louis Stevenson’s use of language originated by Washington Irving. Hellen Keller’s alleged plagiarism, of a fairy tale once read to her, is thought to be cryptomnesia too. Given the existence of multiples, however, it’s possible that two authors could independently write the same or alarmingly similar stories. Maar finds it likely that Nabokov had in fact read von Eschwege’s “Lolita,” but if he didn’t, it’s not unreasonable to say that the tale was one that had entered the adjacent possible, that that name, for both writers, shone with some precocious sensuality, and that the collection of existing parts that became von Eschwege’s “*Lolita*” could also have become Nabokov’s.

* * *

It used to be that originality was a lesser prize, around the time that Dionysius took Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* and made it into *imitatio*, the practice of reworking another's text in order to improve it. Published writings were not copyrighted nor were they perfect. Like metal they could be put back into the fire and hammered into new shapes. This was natural in part because authors were thought to be conduits more than creators, channels through which another being spoke. Greeks called this being a daemon. Romans, a genius. It wasn't until the late 1700s that the Romantic era brought to bear the idea of complete originality, and therefore the solitary genius. Writers, painters, poets no longer had geniuses. They were geniuses. We took the mysteries of creation and swallowed them whole.

Writers like Elizabeth Gilbert have said publicly that it's time to re-acknowledge the muse, the daemon, the genius. Yet it's simplistic to imagine we're on so circuitous a route, that all will be well if we invent helpful creatures that venture out of the shadows to sit on our shoulders. In their respective works, not once does Lethem or Shields claim the intervention of some disembodied voice. Instead they point to culture, to the published works of writers and essayists, semanticists and presidents and Supreme Court justices, to *Summer of '42* and *The Talent Given Us* and the misreading of a New Yorker piece on Bill Clinton as the start of a Miranda July story, to Dylan's *Love and Theft* and Kanye's "Gold Digger" and Muddy Waters' "Country Blues," to Mickey Mouse, the bible, Beastie Boys, *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, New York Film Festival catalogue copy, letters to the editor, public conversations and intimate conversations and conversations overheard in restaurants. A collective of culture that exists at all times, for all people, explicitly to those who've encountered it but capable of breaching the fence of exposure, of twining itself around minds that assume originality, of imbuing creators with synchronous visions that alter the existent realm and redraw the lines of the adjacent possible.

Several years after completing "Ecstasy," Lethem told an interviewer, "I've been an advocate against the view of the writer as a partitioned genius hanging in conceptual space, or up on a mountain, a bringer of Promethean fire, some unique transmission that comes out of nowhere. I prefer the opposite view—that writers come from somewhere. They read things, and they think about them, and they incorporate other people's thoughts. Reading and writing are the same thing."

Once again, Lethem's words weren't original, though this time he wasn't so much borrowing as further illustrating the existence of multiples in literary thought. Historian Robert Darnton has said the same thing, but he wasn't talking about appropriation per se—he was talking about commonplace books, intricately indexed notebooks kept by educated European men during and after the Enlightenment, personal journals full of aphorisms, meaningful passages, and inspiring quotations, all copied by hand and kept nearby for use in public debate or forum. Some commonplace books were full of sketches of potential inventions, others observations from daily life. "[Early modern Englishmen] broke texts into fragments and assembled them into new patterns by transcribing them in different sections of their notebooks," he wrote. "They then reread the copies and rearranged the patterns while adding more excerpts. Reading and writing

were therefore inseparable activities.”

The practice eventually fell out of style, but “commonplacing” is once again in vogue, if not formally, then in the way we synthesize disparate ideas. Despite the fact that commonplace books rarely were published—and then only after the keeper’s death—the relationship of Shields’s copied passages and original writings in *Reality Hunger* mimics so closely the methodology of John Locke or Francis Bacon that the manifesto begs to be compared to commonplace books, the only distinction its purposeful curation.

Technology has made commonplacing a natural way to read and write. “Traveling between home and work on a single day, I count 44 notes I’ve scribbled down,” Liz Danzico wrote in 2011. “These notes are in part private, in part public, and in all parts messy. They are everyday marginalia—notes in a printed book, saves in Instapaper, lists in Simplenote, likes in Tumblr, shares in Google Reader. They are spontaneous bursts of inspiration, reading data, that I’ve come upon and don’t want to lose track of, noted and collected across media and devices. Scattered marginalia of life, saved.”

On February 29, 2012, on a Tumblr called Luke’s Commonplace Book, “Luke” posted the following: “Young people will take everything, mix it all up, and come with something new,” a quote originally tweeted by @fchimero, a public intellectual who told an interviewer last year, “I’d like an easy way to get my marginalia and comments from my physical books into a digital environment. ... I guess what I’m asking for is a digital rendition of the commonplace book.”

Johnson keeps something of a commonplace book, his iteration perhaps most similar to its predecessors: private, functional, heavily indexed, and—the envy of Enlightenment-era individuals—searchable. “For more than a decade now, I have been curating a private digital archive of quotes that I’ve found intriguing,” he writes. “I keep all these quotes in a database using a program called DEVONthink, where I also store my own writing: chapters, essays, blog posts, notes. By combining my own words with passages from other sources, the collection becomes something more than just a file storage system. It becomes a digital extension of my imperfect memory, an archive of all my old ideas and the ideas that have influenced me.”

In the early 2000s, Johnson was researching a book on cholera. He opened DEVONthink and ran a search of all collected passages. It turned up a bit about bones repurposing calcium waste. “It sent me off on a long and fruitful tangent into the way complex systems—whether cities or bodies—find productive uses for the waste they create,” he writes. “That idea became a central organizing theme for one of the chapters in the cholera book.” Then he asks a question: “Who was responsible for that initial idea? Was it me, or the software? ... Obviously the computer wasn’t conscious of the idea taking shape ... [but] I’m not at all confident that I would have made the initial connection without [its] help.” What isn’t mentioned, of course, is that the original passage had already been copied once, into the software from a source that goes unnamed at any point.

* * *

It was Carl Jung who first wrote about synchronicity, a word he coined to describe events linked not by causality but by meaning, occurrences that include coincidental duplications like the existence of two Lolitas. It is this focus on meaningfulness that's brought the conversation about the ownership of ideas into view again; authors are finding it more and more difficult to pretend the inputs don't directly alter the outputs, partly because the number of inputs has become so incomprehensible. "Cultural and commercial languages invade [...] our lives and our lexicon," Lethem begins. "Everything I write [...] is to some extent collage," Shields finishes. "Meaning, ultimately, is a matter of adjacent data."

The more media there is, the more books and blogs and news reports and infographics and zines and comics and essays and poems, and the more criticism we read about all these things, the album reviews and editorials and literary suppositions, everything compressed into one long, nearly eternal locution, the higher the likelihood that synchronous moments emerge. The higher the likelihood that in the course of researching this essay, I would, in Asheville, North Carolina, pick up Kevin Young's *The Grey Album*, that on my doorstep I would find Jeannie Vanasco's "Absent Things As If They Were Present," that Omar Rodriguez Lopez would explain that music wasn't written but extracted, that "authors, composers, whatever we are—it's really just being lent to us, but like land or love, it doesn't belong to anybody, it belongs to everybody." The higher the likelihood that forty-eight hours before I completed this essay, and after two, three, four, five drafts had been written and discarded, and refocused, and left alone, Lethem's quote about writers not as "partitioned geniuses" but as "coming from somewhere" would appear, wrapped in plastic and buried near the gutter on page sixty-seven of a magazine I'd forgotten I subscribed to, on my coffee table.

Shortly before this, on an unseasonably warm night in early April, an audience planning to see what it assumed was a play assembled in a whitewashed storefront theater in Jefferson Park, an immigrant neighborhood far from Chicago's central Loop, mingling silently, not meeting, not sitting in the folding chairs arranged in the center of room, not getting too close to the curious hats made out of paper and ribbons hung on the wall, or any of the other many artworks that comprised what the girl who told them where to leave their things called "the gallery." When the show began, it became clear this was not just a play. The audience traveled from room to room, out one storefront and into another, a company of voyeurs that, on occasion, was invited into the scenes, privy to dance instruction and cartography and a young man's memories of his oldest family friends.

As the show progressed, allusion became appropriation, then outright theft. The entire conceit was stolen from Maira Kalman's *The Principles of Uncertainty*, the imagery on the walls of "the gallery" taken directly from her book. Found objects filled the map room and the collections room, and eventually the audience discovered that nothing was outside the realm of

the performers' borrowing. They plagiarized their own lives. They led the audience out the front doors and to their favorite delis and Mexican restaurants—their *real* favorites—deliriously in and out of character as they crafted an experience based on every cultural artifact they could find, a collective essay drawn almost overwhelmingly from everyday life. Even the interactions that night between audience member and performer were taken and woven back into the play.

Content drives design. If the content of our lives is increasingly fractured, absorbed in half-read articles and out-of-sequence episodes, in literary pursuits that can span genres and centuries with a few quick clicks, and via such a cache of cultural criticism that there barely exists the notion of original source, then the design of our art will mimic this. Today, there is no reality without media, no life without culture. Living such saturated lives, it's not hard to imagine that actors, authors, artists might look around and see nothing but synchronicity, a world in which all things are connected, a bristling manifestation of Jung's *Unus mundus*, "one world," an underlying unified reality from which all things emerge, and to which all things return.



BOUND WITH BRIGHT, BEAUTIFUL THINGS

BY CAROLINE PICARD

“Moreover, here in this forest, we hear a variety of sounds...so many...mere sounds. That’s all they are; they should not cause fear to anyone. We hear the rumbling of clouds, the whistling of wind in the reeds, we hear sounds of lutes and drums, big and small, sounds of conches and bells, of wagons and doors, creaking, sounds of axes and saws and similar implements — all kinds of sounds are heard here. One should not be afraid of them.”¹

There is always a time before, the second/minute/hour/day/week/ month/year before, a preceding generation, an older dynasty. Every human occasion is locked into a temporal suite, where instants fall on the page of our collective and singular imaginations like notes on score. Of course, we acknowledge a blackout period in the beginning of the universe before the planets began their daily and annual rotations, before the sun first sputtered to life. That time has been scientifically established, yet it remains impossible to access from the trenches of temporal thought. Embedded in that temporality is human kind, a species that measures everything by cause and effect, having believed in Sun Gods first, lest they withhold their light.

Years ago, I found *The Pancatantra*, an ancient text of Aesopian-like fables. Its authorship is attributed to Visnu Sarma, who put the stories to paper in the 11th Century. The stories date even father back, claiming their inception at the farthest limit of our human imagination; a time

1 *The Pancatantra*. Sarma, Visnu. Penguin Classics, 1995, p.30.

I can only suppose would coincide with the beginning of speech. That time was a space of darkness, presumably, yet these stories are full of light and life. They capture an exquisite variety of life forms. To fathom the entire spectrum of life, as it is depicted in this relatively modest book, is to better understand humanity's place in the fervent mesh of life.

The book opens with a titillating plea. An old king has three sons. He admits their ignorance and begs his councilors make his sons wise. "Far better that a man have no sons born / or, that born they die; though there be grief it passes soon; / But to have living sons, who turn out fools, / and obstinate fools at that, that indeed / is a lifelong misery to bear."² *The Pancatantra* is set up as an antidote to ignorance and idiocy.

"To this request of the king, Visnu Sarma replied, 'My lord, I do not sell my learning, not even the gift of a hundred land-grants. Now hear me speak; I speak the simple, unvarnished truth. I have no craving for wealth, my lord. I am not eighty years of age, and my senses have turned away from their objects. But I shall do what you ask of me. If I do not teach your sons in such a manner that in six months time they do not have complete mastery over all the wide expanse of political and practical wisdom, then let my name be thrown away and forgotten.'"³

The narrator continues, explaining that Sarma's promise was kept. He composed five books of stories ("The Estrangement of Friends," "The Winning of Friends," "Of Crows and Owls," "Loss of Gains," and "Rash Deeds"), which, once read and studied by the princes, engendered their political wisdom.

Each of the sections provides an overarching frame within which sub-stories emerge. While the overarching world of the book remains constant it is difficult to anticipate the narrative's course, traversing as it does such a broad strata of interlocking microcosms. Each microcosm contains its own dilemmas through which we learn of its creatures. The creatures in one story-world will interrupt the flow of their own narrative arc to tell an anecdote from another story-world involving other life forms. It is disorienting and occasionally a story feels incomplete, lost to the momentum of other narratives. Additionally, every single tale, often at multiple points, is punctuated by aphoristic poems that inspire characters to make one choice over another.

"To persist in milking a bull, thinking: 'O! What a great udder, it must be a cow' / To embrace a eunuch, exclaiming: / 'Ah! A young maiden of elegant charm': / To pick up a bit of glass cut to catch light / and sparkle, mistaking it for a sapphire:/ O! How vain and useless! / So is the delight in serving the witless / that is born of blind affection for them."⁴

2 ibid, p.3.

3 ibid. p. 5.

4 Ibid. p. 98.

At first the characters seem like vehicles for these aphoristic messages—strategies to contextualize and therefore instill bits of wisdom. Yet these messages are not cohesive in and of themselves. The aphorisms don't come from an objective voice that permeates and unifies the whole collection of stories. Instead the aphorisms read like shifting but practical insight, which characters use like furniture, moving around and about or sitting upon the wisdom-of-the-day in order to better assess their respective predicaments. Sometimes characters go against their own advice, or measure two contradicting suggestions against one another. In other instances they follow prescriptive advice against their best interest. Sometimes the characters survive, as a seeming testimony to the strength of their wisdom, whereas in other cases they become casualties of mistakes. Chance plays as much a part of every outcome as the character's personality, circumstance and insight. There is no one sure fast way to solve a problem. A bedbug named Crawly, for instance, falls to her death after properly adhering to custom.

“In the inner apartments of the palace of a certain king there stood a couch incomparable, furnished with all imaginable beauties and comforts. A coverlet was spread over it and on the coverlet lived a bedbug named Crawly. Surrounded by her large extended family of sons and daughters, and their sons and daughters, and sundry other kin, she bit the king when he was fast asleep and sucked his blood. Richly fed by blood she grew really plump; she was a striking bedbug indeed.”⁵

Drone, a wasp, pays Crawly a visit, convincing her to let him stay. “I have tasted the blood of all four classes: priests and teachers, warriors and rulers, merchants and traders, peasants and workers,” Drone says. He begs her to let him taste the blood of her king—a type of blood as yet beyond to his expertise—describing it as “the elixir of life.”⁶ Crawly at first refuses, then acquiesces after the wasp's prostration.

According to her, one might anger the gods by refusing another's excessive humility. She lets him stay, giving Drone strict instructions to bite the king on his feet and only once the King has fallen to sleep. Despite her instructions, the wasp cannot help himself and bites the still-awake king on the back. The king is roused and surly from the sting. He has his couch examined, finds Crawly and kills her. Presumably the rest of her family dies as well. The wasp, however, flies away unscathed. Despite the seeming authority of Crawly's insight, her own plight ultimately lay in the nature of the wasp. Given that he did not share her interests, he did not follow her wishes. Perhaps one could make up another aphorism to warn against such instances: *Do not put your life in the hands of the stranger, unless the stranger is at your mercy*, but here too cases would arrive to disprove the rule. Nothing is hard and fast and while wise sayings are useful, one's own judgment is ultimately best.

Still, Crawly's tale is not only significant because of its Don't-Spoil-a-Good-Thing message,

5 Ibid. p. 105.

6 Ibid. p. 105.

but also because it so adeptly and efficiently captures a stratum of various wills in one brief interlude. Even the bedbug community is affected by the King's prowess. The wisdom Crawly uses to make her decision was wisdom overheard when the King's advisors told their ruler stories. Similarly, through the nature of wasps and bedbugs, we are presented with a King's biological interiority, calling forth another, inner space that requires its own balance and applies to all creatures. Over the course of the novel one becomes aware of a vast and teeming multitude in which thousands upon thousands of various wills toss together, influencing one another through conflict and resolution, while reaching for inherited advice by which to guide themselves. It is the cohesion of the overarching framework that remains so remarkable, capturing as it does a kind of psycho-eco-system, one that humanity can — at least intuitively — grasp.



Most of the time humanity conceives of itself in a singular, independent frame of reference. We imagine ourselves distinct from our flanking biological entourage. Humanity wants to identify itself as something distinct from the animal. Part animal and part divine, a species capable of language, capable of conceiving of its own death; we are a species with a deep cultural and historical inheritance. Nevertheless, while those attributes might at first appear like signs of our unique capacity, when examined, they fall apart. In every instance there is another creature that shares something of our nature, or a particular skill seeming first like a trailhead leads back to a perplex muddle with an animal instinct at its start. As is the case with language, for instance, “Up until the eighteenth century, language — which would become man’s identifying characteristic par excellence — jumps across orders and classes, for it is suspected that even birds can talk.”⁷ Perhaps because of our inability to answer this peculiar question about human essence, we are heavily invested in proving our superior potential over and over again. Human civilization is a stronghold against the rigmarole of species and animal appetites. *The Pancantantra* takes a different tact. It anthropomorphizes its animals, providing its creatures with human mechanisms, such as language and desire. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben also examines human identity in relation to the animal. In his case, he does not anthropomorphize the blood-sucking insect, rather he contextualizes that creature temporally. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Agamben examines where and how humanity defines itself with respect to its animal cousins. The distance between “us” and “them” is not so extreme, it turns out. Halfway through his book, Agamben cites historical naturalist Jakob von Uexkill.

Uexhill rejects a single biological world of progressing life forms that share a common purpose and world. He does not prescribe to the vision that life forms commiserate upon survival in the same way, a way that would lead them to necessarily pit themselves against one another. In his view, humankind is not necessarily at the apex. Rather, Uexhill imagines an infinite variety of realities, or “perceptual worlds.” For the most part, those worlds do not communicate; they can be reciprocally exclusive while nevertheless relating to one another at discrete instances. You could imagine that they observe the same time signature while being unaware of one another’s melody. In this respect, they operate very much like the creatures in Sarma’s *Pancantantra*, intersecting at various points in time, while nevertheless being motivated by independent and uncoordinated agendas.

Traditionally, *The Pancantantra* is seen as a book about human existence that borrows the animal form to reveal or reflect something essential about the human world. The animal embodiment of these messages is only a device, making a human audience more receptive. What if we flip those expectations? What if the various species depicted are in fact representing themselves? With this new premise in mind, the book becomes a snap shot of the infinite variety of life forms on earth, life forms that have been translated into human terms, so that we might access, through our imagination, different perceptual realities. These Aesopian figures provide a portal into otherwise inaccessible biological stratospheres, conveying as a result, an interstitial

existence — the web of life that humans, rabbits, amoebas and trees all participate in.

Agamben describes how the fly cannot physically perceive the spider web — that each world (*Umwelt*) of spider and fly, while being inextricably linked, somehow exclude one another. These two perceptual worlds “are absolutely uncommunicating, and yet so perfectly in tune that we might say that the original score of the fly, which we can also call its original image or archetype, acts on that of the spider in such a way that the web the spider weaves can be described as ‘fly-like.’ Though the spider can in no way see the *Umwelt* of the fly...the web expresses the paradoxical coincidence of this reciprocal blindness.”⁸ He goes on to describe the tick, a creature that aspires with its entire being to suck blood despite lacking a variety of senses: sight, hearing and taste, for instance. It wagers its *idos* against chance, lingering on a high branch until it smells (for it can smell) the tang of a warm-blooded animal. Upon recognizing the smell, it hurls itself off its limb, into a dark and unknowing void (so hopeful it seems) to land (if it is lucky) on a body, to burrow into it, drink and then die — fulfilled at last. Because it cannot taste, it will drink any body-temperature fluid. The tick is aimed at one purpose alone, an end towards which its few senses conspire. Like Crawly in Sarma’s text, Uexhill’s tick is also reliant on and entwined with the lives of countless other chances and occasions, not the least of which is the warm beast upon the forest path. In the pursuit of its end, it engages a temporal span, a sequence of events: birth, development, breeding, climbing a tree (blindly), waiting, smelling, hunger, descent, fulfillment or failure, death. Agamben describes one tick that allegedly lived for 18 years in a dark laboratory, waiting for a body to suck. This tick appeared to exist outside of time, in a kind of liminal space, lacking the capacity to measure the span of its experience. It was totally divorced from outside (and changing) influence. But, Agamben posits, what is time to such a creature? “How is it possible for a living being that consists entirely in relation to its environment to survive in absolute deprivation of that environment? And what sense does it make to speak of ‘waiting’ without time and without world?”⁹ For such a creature is not inhabiting being, but a dormant state of potentiality, presumably that suspended *could be* facilitated its exceptionally long life span.

Agamben’s delicate description of this animal world, the facets of animal planes — even, the impossible desire of humanity to define the bounds between itself and the animal kingdom is what *The Pancantantra* also describes, a fluidity of life forms and beings, in which illusions, narratives and moirés clash. Humanity finds itself among this chattering sea of intersecting politics, distracted by its own, albeit inconceivable, perceptual limits.

But the question remains, what makes the human distinct? It seems impossible to isolate something intrinsically human, what separates us from animals, and yet we vehemently maintain the border between “them” and ourselves. “Man exists historically only in tension; he can be human only to the degree that he transcends and transforms the anthropophorous animal which supports him, and only because, through the action of negation, he is capable of

8 Ibid, p.42.

9 Ibid. p. 47.

mastering and, eventually, destroying his own animality.”¹⁰ Perhaps because it is so difficult to conceive the greater framework that we might collectively inhabit with other creatures, perhaps inability to apprehend such a framework exposes our own *Umwelt*, we prefer the myth of an non-contingent cultural identity.



10 Ibid., p.12

as such efforts must be made to try and conceive a relationship with our environment. Since we do not exist inside of a book, we tend toward a scientific perspective, one with natural laws to which all things adhere. And, of course, we examine the past, establishing a narrative link, such as evolution, that might explain the presence of different life forms. In this respect scientific reason provides a parallel system of aphoristic insight, or law.

* * *

George Aperghis wrote an opera about evolution. Entirely in French, the piece is written for five women, who — in its American debut through Joria Productions — walked on stage wearing lab coats and science goggles. One carried a cello. After taking her seat apart from the others, the cellist explains that there is no beginning, no time “before,” but that we must look to immediate forms to discover human nature.

“In the beginning, in the beginning, there was not a beginning. The common ancestor is unknown. Between each species and the common ancestor, who is unknown, one must seek, forever seek the intermediate forms.” (*Sextuor: L’origin des Espèces*).

Drawing on both Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* and Stephen Jay Gould’s *Wonderful Life*, *Sextuor: L’origin des Espèces* unfolds. With these texts as an anchor, and the ever-present counter balance of the cello (the only instrument the opera calls for), one conceives through sound the history of life in its many stages. The script periodically describes a “nonsensical interlude” — denoting passages of sound comprised primarily of phonemes. The singers produce their gibberish with such conviction as to instill a sense of purpose in the audience. Much of the sound seems hysterical, harpy-like and unformed, yet perhaps aptly capturing the chaos of ecological awareness, as the five women fall extraordinarily into (and out of) sync. The cellist maintains her seat on the side for the duration, interjecting sensible, philosophical statements — many of which were gleaned directly from Darwin’s text. While syncopation appears perilous and unstable, it bears remarkable fruit. For at such times when the phonemes congeal, spreading amongst the singers in a harmonic union, a new species emerges. What follows is the description of a particular life form: “We are in the Age of Arthropods, in the fossiliferous rocks the oldest have suddenly appeared the species belonging to the great divisions of animals. But we are in the Age of Arthropods, far more numerous than Mammals.”¹¹

Over the course of this production, the singers describe a myriad of life forms using scientific terminology, beings even simpler and older than the mammals and insects encountered in *The Pancantantra*. These are creatures who, in some cases, barely possess locomotion, yet they have emerged from the sludge of life ever so slowly, from that space before human time. Although the performers act out brief and humorous presentations of each life form that is named, the

11 *Sextuor: L’origin des Espèces*, Georges Aperghis

objective distance their costumes signify collapses into parody. The human cannot be so easily separated, since the natural history being presented is one that belongs to all forms of life alike.

Sextuor: L'origin des Espèces is not officially an opera. It is an *oratorio*. While operatic characters interact with one another, operas also engage historical or mythological themes. Oratorios, on the other hand, have traditionally dealt with sacred material; they are often produced in churches and require little in the way of sets. *Sextuor: L'origin des Espèces* occupies a wonderful in-between-ness where these genres are concerned. On the one hand, it uses a secular, scientific tradition as a sacred platform, conjuring the feel of an origin-story within the terminology of science. It incorporates colloquial myth, telling the Cinderella story between the music of birds and the introduction of fish. As in a proper oratorio, the characters interact very little. What interaction exists appears incidental. That incidental interaction seems very much at the heart of all these inter-species relations, and yet the peculiar unfolding, the unavoidable progression of life finds an easy metaphor in musical composition.

Still, we are bound in time with all the other bright and beautiful things. We must rely on books and scores of music — accounts that must conclude, like lifetimes with beginnings and ends. Biographies must surely account for the demise of their subjects, and a performance like *Sextuor*, based on the fleeting occasion of life, must therefore account for its own disappearance. We cannot conceive of immortality, it bucks the scaffold on which human experience hangs. Thus we cannot manifest an unending creation, whether it be a performance, a book, a building or a life: nothing lasts forever. Suddenly humanity's advantage — its peculiar capacity to tell a story — seems especially mistaken in its privilege. We feel an immanent darkness. The stage goes dark after a particularly moving solo by Love where she describes the pleasure of being alive, just shy of an epiphany perhaps:

“But I, I was truly having fun. I whirl about as if drunk. I understood that I was carrying a great weight on my shoulders. I have an explanation for the beginnings of life on Earth. I understood that I was already lucky to be a living being.”¹²

Following her song (she has taken off her lab coat and wears only a dress now), the other performers gather in a circle, joining hands around a single light. The cellist puts down her bow and joins the others, who must open their circle to admit her.

“O, you who listen to me tell this story full of memories and holes, we are that improbable and fragile species heading toward extinction and the extinction of all species, internal causes, external causes, I do not know, we the original species that tells the story of its origins full of holes and gaps, because we have so few documents, an incomplete story of the Earth in an ever-changing dialect, of which we have but the last volume, some fragments

¹² But of course there is a need to account for phenomenal occasions outside of human events and
Sextuor

of its chapters and some lines of its pages or some letters, and words of uncertain meaning! Immense Nature improbable and unpredictable, contingent nature, where are we going, we who say life was wonderful, we who say life is wonderful?"¹³

The house lights turn up. Applause resounds.

Despite these efforts, we remain restricted by human perspective. While *Sextuor* might engage an inkling of ecological history, emerging as it does from a kind of nonsensical, non-time, we still cannot fully comprehend the breadth of time and species that such a genealogy captures. What inkling is fostered relies on the cellist, our reasonable guide who sits apart from the throng, at a safe distance and seems the most "human." Yet she remains outside of time as well, the pragmatic observer with an objective, and therefore comfortable, seat.

How then to conceive of a different time? A non-time? What might the consciousness of Uexhill's sleeping tick look like? How do we access that? In a particular instance in *The Pancantantra*, immortal gods step in, without making themselves apparent to the humans they influence. A man who spins cloth for a living, a Weaver of the lowest caste, falls in love with a princess. In order to woo her in secret, he convinces his best friend and chariot-maker to build a flying machine. With that carriage, having dressed himself in the manner of a god, the Weaver visits the princess at night. "She saw the form of Lord Visnu mounted on the divine eagle in the sky."¹⁴ He convinces her to sleep with him, claiming to marry her according to the rules of the gods. He begs her to keep their union secret but the Princess soon confesses everything to her parents. They are overjoyed. The King decides to use this new alliance to his advantage. He goes to war on a neighbor, whereupon our humble Weaver is asked to appear on the kingdom's behalf. "'O, Lord, what shall I do now?'" he asks himself. "'I could simply get into my flying machine and fly away someplace; in that case I lose this pearl among women, my bride forever. And on top of it...[would] will kill my father-in-law. Therefore I have to accept the challenge and do battle.'"¹⁵

The Weaver pretends to be Visnu in public, accepting the consequences of his own death. By a curious twist of fate, Visnu is so enamored by the chariot-maker's display that he decides to help. "'This weaver has the spark of divinity about him...therefore part of me shall enter his mortal frame.'"¹⁶ Unwittingly possessed by Visnu, the Weaver becomes the hero of battle. All the immortals come to watch his triumph, amazed at his divine embodiment. "Even the Creator does not see through / a well-devised fraud."¹⁷ The Weaver and the Princess live happily ever after. Curiously, the Weaver never understands what happened. In this particular instance, human interaction is momentarily commensurate with an immortal hierarchy, an interaction

13 Ibid

14 *The Pancantantra*. Sarma, Visnu. Penguin Classics, 1995, p.

15 Ibid. p 87.

16 Ibid. p 88.

17 Ibid. p 89.

that nevertheless remains intuitive at best to the humans it impacts. The story brings forth the idea of temporal relations once more; the immortals inhabit a different time-space. To a lesser extreme, so the tick, the lion, the elephant, and the human being also boast different life spans, thereby harboring different sequential realities. While the gods themselves remain mysterious (and are largely missing from most of the *Pancantantra*'s stories) they nonetheless inhabit (and therefore illustrate) a space outside of human perspective and experience, a space with an undeniable presence even if it is impossible to grasp.

* * *

There is something simpler about positing a remote human position that is outside the throng and pulse of our Darwinian current. It is more comfortable to presume a cohesive, hierarchical system in which humans occupy the acme of perfection: the final conclusion to a quadrillion-year long process. Still, the order of civilization loosens on the fray. There is a conceivable end to human history, an inevitable process towards which we are tending. There are nonsensical interludes and hybrid monstrosities to contend with. Curiously *The Pancantantra* ends with a tale of a hunchback, a three breasted princess and a blind man: three anatomical exceptions. They occupy the periphery of our species-identity. In the book, they are sent out on a boat on a river, to live outside society in a foreign land. While the princess is married to the blind man, she has an affair with the hunchback. She and the hunchback devise to poison her husband and make a soup with a black snake, telling him it is fish. The blind man goes to stir the pot, it smells so good.

“As he kept stirring, the poisonous vapors rising from the pot got into his eyes. And imagine his surprise when the thick film that had covered his eyes began to melt and peel away gradually. Noticing this beneficial effect of the steam on his sight he opened his eyes wide and did his best to let the steam impinge on them. Soon his vision cleared completely so that he could look into the pot. And what did he see at the bottom of the cooking pot but a chopped up black serpent.”¹⁸

Not understanding why his wife might poison him, the blind man continues to feign blindness. He is camouflaged by his assumed disability and watches as the hunchback kisses the princess. Enflamed with rage, the blind man picks up the hunchback throws him against the princess. “The force of the impact of the hunchback’s body on her chest pushed her third breast in, while her lover’s hump dashing against her bosom, straightened out.”¹⁹ This unexpected turn of events underscores the influence of chance once more, while calling forth the curiosity of freaks — figures on the cusp of human culture. In one flail swoop they resume the traditional

18 Ibid., p.434.

19 Ibid., p.434.

human body, and thereafter remain both the hunchback, for instance, and the non-hunchback. Or the three-breasted princess and the two-breasted princess. The exceptional forms their bodies once took are not stripped from their identities, but rather become present in what these characters are no longer. *The Open* ends similarly with an inverse action in which human the difference between humans and animals dissolves. “To articulate a zone of non-knowledge — or better of a-knowledge — means in this sense not simply to let something be, but to leave something outside of being, to render it unsaveable.”²⁰ It is true that we can only see what we have learned to look for, and it is true that our imagination provides a vehicle to access what is beyond experience, yet also we must resign ourselves to ignorance, to resign the impulse of human sanctity. “And if one day, according to a now-classic-image, the ‘face in the sand’ that the sciences of man have formed on the shore of our history should finally be erased, what will appear in its place will not be a new *mandylion* or “Veronica” of a regained humanity or animality.

The righteous with animal heads in the Ambrosian do not represent a new declension of the man-animal relation so much as a figure of ‘great ignorance’ which lets them both be outside of being, saved precisely in their being unsaveable.”²¹

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CAROLINE PICARD (P20, 23)

20 Agamben, *The Open*, p. 91.

21 Ibid., p.92.

ARBITR

RATION

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PEANUT BUTT

BY BLASTER “AL” ACKERMAN



Two summers ago my wife Evelyn and I were spending August in a remote corner of the Berkshires at a resort hotel where the owners and twenty or more of the guests had died of Legionnaire’s Disease the previous season. Immediately following this mishap the hotel itself had closed, and now it was boarded up for the duration, so Evelyn and I were a little surprised when we came down from our room one evening to find another guest sitting in the dining room. He looked to be in his early forties. Fairly enormous. He had a salt-and-pepper beard about four feet long, was wearing granny glasses and an orange wind-breaker so bright it was nearly in the day-glo range, and his head, approximately the size and shape of a large white cantaloupe, was shaved clean as a whistle. But what really stood out about him was his jar of peanut butter. No two ways about it: he had what must have been the largest jar of peanut butter I’d ever seen; had it sitting right there at the table with him, by which I mean it was occupying a chair across the table from him, like a regular dinner companion. And to call it merely a jar really doesn’t do it justice. More accurately, it was a bucket, or a tub, one of those black and white generic containers that are affected by commercial restaurant chains or abnormally huge families that are looking hard to economize. As I say, it was so enormous you had to wonder how he managed to lug it around, without giving himself a hernia.

Not wanting to appear like a couple of “Nosy Nellies,” Evelyn and I acted as if everything was normal—as if his presence there in the dining room with this monster tub of peanut butter

was the most natural thing in the world. Evelyn even managed to dish up her most affable smile.

“Why, hello there,” she said.

“Hi ya,” said the peanut butter stranger.

“Nice weather this evening,” said Evelyn.

“Is it? I hadn’t noticed,” said the peanut butter stranger.

It was approaching the cocktail hour. Consequently I had come downstairs carrying an unopened fifth of Early Times. I now shifted the neck of the bottle to my left hand, and using my right, just the fingertips, lightly touched my wife in the small of her back. “Go easy, babe,” I said, without moving my lips.

Because, of course, deep down, I could feel the warning signals flash. We both could. After all, the hotel was supposed to be closed, and our own presence there was strictly unofficial (finding abandoned or condemned hotels to stay at is like a hobby with Evelyn and me, you might say), so we couldn’t help wondering if this fellow might be a prowler or a break-in artist, or, to go by his unusual appearance, maybe even one of those flat-out criminally insane types who show up occasionally at abandoned resort hotels, carrying a lot of kooky ideas plus their mom’s head in a hat box. Or, in this instance, in an oversize peanut butter tub.

Worse yet, what if he turned out to be some local deputy or constable who had spotted our Caddy parked in the brush behind the lodge and had come in to ask the usual pointed questions and give us a hard time? What, then?

But in a little further preliminary conversation soon established the fact that, much like ourselves, he was simply a person who knew that any hotel with a padlock and a CONDEMNED sign on the front door was bound to be a great place to stay. As he himself so succinctly put it during those first few minutes when we were getting acquainted: “I like a hotel that’s quiet—where you don’t have to haggle over the bill or fool around with any tips or needless gratuities.” Naturally, Evelyn and I both said “amen” to these sentiments and after that we relaxed and had a pleasant conversation.

He said we should call him Son of Skippy. “My name used to be just plain Gary,” he explained. “Gary Simonsen. But I changed it to be Son of Skippy in honor of King Skippy, the God of the Peanut, or anyway, the Great Spirit that oversees all peanut butter products I guess might be more accurate to say. And why not? Goddammit, I owe my life to King Skippy and His holy blessed intervention on my behalf.” You could tell how moved he was when he said this by the way he broke down, right there at the table, and wept. Not just any little puny sniffing or minor damp-eye, either; these were great huge wracking sobs that convulsed his entire body and that, once he got going, looked as if they might continue indefinitely.

Evelyn and I exchanged glances. I could tell she was dying to hear more about King Skippy-Son of Skippy business, as well as to ask him about his mammoth tub of peanut butter, where that fit in, what was what, etc. She was obviously thinking hard, trying to come up with some casual yet effective way to broach the subject, which, I couldn’t help thinking to judge by the way he was boo-hooing and carrying on, was something she might have plenty of time to work

on. But then he surprised us by getting hold of himself. He dried his eyes on the tablecloth, with this modicum of control restored, seemed to take a fresh look at both of us. Especially at Evelyn, because that was when he asked her, “Say, haven’t I seen your picture somewhere before? Like in the newspapers, or maybe in a magazine?”

Well, you can imagine how flattered my wife was by this, having someone recognize her that way. She was nearly simpering as she said, “Oh, I don’t know. You may have come across one of my *advertisements*”—(nearly making it sound like she was doing a full French pronunciation)—“that is to say, you may have come across one of those if you were a *Penthouse* or and *Adam* reader, way back when. Of course, all that was ages ago, when I was still doing mail-order photographic modeling, but perhaps you remember those offers that used to appear in the back pages of the men’s magazines? Where you were supposed to send \$5 to Glamco Enterprises in White Plains and receive ten art-studies mailed in a plain brown envelope to the privacy of your own home, or for \$10 you could get the special bonus of twenty-five art-studies for \$10, and so on and so forth. In those days you *may* remember if you ever saw me featured, I was billed as ‘Evelyn Chest and her \$50,00 Treasure Nest.’ You know, sort of like a pun on the famous old exotic star ‘Evelyn West and her \$50,000 Treasure Chest?’ Only difference, in *my* act the gimmick was I wore a bird’s nest instead of a g-string, and inserted a hard-boiled eggs up my twat.”

Hell’s bells, you should have seen this Son of Skippy guy, seen his face light up when he heard that. “I knew it,” he said, slapping the table. “Sure. Sure, I used to see your ads in those magazines all the time. Especially back when I was in the Army—before I became converted and was saved.”

Well, you can imagine—all that good attention. Evelyn by this time was beaming from ear to ear. Eating it up.

After that, he shifted his eyes and took a closer look at me and asked if I had been in the entertainment business, too. “Well, not exactly,” I said. “Although my picture’s certainly appeared in the tabloids plenty enough times. I’m John ‘Case-a-Day’ Eaton, and you might could say I hold the all-time unofficial east coast record for D. W. I.” And then, though I usually make it a policy not to toot my own horn overmuch, I couldn’t resist giving him a thumbnail rundown on some of my more spectacular and memorable arrests. I said, “I was once convicted for driving a distance of no less than seventy-five miles up the wrong side of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I was doing 125-mph when the troopers pulled me over, and I guess that little late-night motoring record still stands.” I smoothed the front of my polo shirt and tried not to sound like Mr. Big Head. “And not long after that, over in Newark, I established what I think must still be the world’s record for knocking down the most parking meters on a single week-day morning. No fewer than seventeen of the things.” I paused, then—for emphasis and effect—having saved the best for last: “Probably, though, I’m best known for crashing my vehicle into the Washington Monument and then backing clear up and crashing it into the Lincoln Monument.”

Well, no question about it, this guy with a giant tub of peanut butter was impressed. He couldn’t stop shaking his head in amazement. That’s the way my driving record affects people.

We chatted some more, this and that, this and that, and eventually Evelyn found a way to bring the conversation around to his peanut butter tub and what it all meant. I was glad she did, as I was feeling curious about it myself. It was damn clever, too, how she went about it: not by appearing to pry, but by casually asking him which he would rather eat—a peanut butter sandwich or an animal that had been run over by a truck on the highway? I have to admit I was surprised when he replied that actually he'd rather eat a big steak and some French fries.

"Most of those animals that you find flattened on the road never taste quite right," he said. "And personally, it would be like a sacrilege for me to even *think* about eating peanut butter." He must have noticed how surprised Evelyn and I both looked when we heard him say this, because he nodded toward his tub of peanut butter, smiled ruefully, shook his head, and said, "Yeah, I know. I guess most people always imagine that I must eat a lot of peanut butter because of how I carry this jumbo-size container around with me wherever I go. But the thing you have to understand is this: to me peanut butter is like a holy sacrament. That's right. To me, peanut butter is a holy, holy thing. You probably think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not."

At this point I was afraid he might be going to break down again, his voice became so emotional whenever he mentioned the words "peanut butter." But, by making an obvious effort, he managed to control himself. He said that if we'd like to hear his story, he wouldn't mind sharing it with us. He said it would undoubtedly be the first time he'd heard about a "genuine peanut butter conversion" or of anyone who had "accepted peanut butter as their personal savior." Well, to say that Evelyn and I were both all ears is like saying that I'm fond of drinking and driving—a definite understatement.

He folded his hands on the table in front of him and squinted off into the distance. "I'll never forget it," he began in a husky, emotion-filled voice. "It was August of '68..."



August of 1968 (he said) and I was in the Army Stationed at Fort Benning—in an infantry company, no less—in August. That was the month my outfit got the word and I mean the *bad* word. How bad? Well, the word was we had exactly one week before we shipped out to 'Nam. Hoo. Boy. Exactly one week; then the Viet-fucking-nam. They'd just finished having Tet over there, and after that the call had come down the horn for more of us two-legged fodder, as in two-legged cannon fodder. So—*scared*? Hoo. Man. I'll bet you've never seen anybody more certain that his number was up than this boy right here. See, I *knew*. I could feel it in my bones.

It was like an absolute rock-bottom certainty to me, that if I let myself be shipped over there, sure as anything I was going to wind up coming home in a zip-loc bag. Therefore I had one week to come up with something and it became—it was like imperative to me that I find some way of getting myself discharged, and a mental—a good old Section Eight?—that seemed like my only hope, but, dammit, dammit to hell, you know something? I couldn't for the life of me think of anything plausible enough or that hadn't already been pulled. Because talk about your competition! Oho! Man! The competition to pull something that would get you out on a Section Eight was something *else*. You name it and I don't care name practically any stunt you can think of and—I don't care *how* crazy—chances are it had probably already been pulled. Just now trying to remember all the crazy stunts that got pulled we'd had guys dressing up and running around in women's high heels and garter belts: "Yoo-hoo, look at me! I'm a fruit!" Guys pretending to hear the voice of God: "God told me to stop shaving an showering." Guys accidentally-on-purpose shooting themselves through the foot or jumping out of windows or I don't know what all. Or one guy. There was this one guy even swallowed a razor blade so they'd let him out. Oh, sure, he filed it down first, he blunted the edges before he swallowed the thing, but still. Anyway, you get the picture. By this stage of the game—1968—you had to pull something pretty damn unusual in the way of a mental disability, or aberration. Otherwise—you know—Leavenworth. So there I am and I'm drawing nothing but blanks. Thinking and thinking but as far as any hot new ideas go, I'm coming up with the Big-Zip. So finally, out of sheer desperation, I fell down on my knees next to my bunk, and I started to pray. Hoo, brother, *how* I prayed. You can't imagine. And in my prayers I made like this vow. I made like this solemn promise vowing I would devote the rest of my life to the worship of anything that could save me. *Anything*. I didn't care what it was. Christ, Buddha, Edsel. You name it. Animal, vegetable, mineral. Anything at all—that was my vow. That's when—well, I know it sounds a little peculiar. But that's when this vision of King Skippy appeared to me. There was like this circle of yellow light over next to my sock drawer, and there He was. I could tell right away it was King Skippy by the way He had his name—"King Skippy"—was embossed in gold letters on the side of his peanut shell. He was riding in this big royal peanut shell, like Cinderella rode in her royal pumpkin coach. He looked a little like Mr. Peanut does in the Planter's ads if you were, like say if you were to cross Mr. Peanut with I don't know, Ben Franklin or somebody. King Skippy looked something like that. And in this very mellow, very kindly and vibrant-sounding voice that seemed to speak inside my head, He spoke up and laid it all out to me. Told me what I must do. The steps I must take and all, to save my ass. Well, you better believe I took this as a holy sign. I didn't hesitate. What I did—I went in the latrine, the one next door to the First Sgt's office, and I stripped naked, and I knelt down beside one of the toilet bowls, and very carefully I smeared peanut butter all over the commode seat (did I mention how I'd swiped a jar of peanut butter out of the mess hall? Uh-huh) and then I hid the jar and after that I just waited. And in a little while when the First Sgt came in the latrine and saw me crouching down nude next to the bowl, I gave him this big smile and scooped up a big fingerful of peanut butter off the commode seat, and tasted it, and went (bright-sounding voice): "It's peanut butter, sir!"

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There is not much more that need be added to this brief account. That Son of Skippy's recitation had immediately created a genuine bond of sympathy and camaraderie between the three of us goes without saying. Evelyn's eyes were even a trifle moist, she was so moved by what she had heard. It was a little past seven-thirty when he finished telling us his story, nearly full dark out by then, and I was about to suggest we all have a generous libation from my bottle of Early Times when we heard the sound of a rusty padlock being kicked loose at the side entrance, and joining us in the dining room a second or so later, in a tan uniform and badge, was a state trooper with a flash light, looking not so much to Evelyn and me as to Son of Skippy. "I see you went and did it again, Gary."

Son of Skippy—Gary—bobbed his head, waved a hand. "Hey there, Officer Orvin! How's it going?"

"Going O.K., Gary. I figured—when the hospital phoned this morning—I told them I figured I knew where I'd find you. And sure enough." The trooper smiled, but it was a smile that could have meant anything; meanwhile, his hand never strayed far from the holstered-pistol on his belt.

"Officer Orvin, I'd like you to meet—these are my two new good friends, Evelyn and her husband John."

"Yeah, right," the trooper said. But he was studying the tub of peanut butter. "Well? Whatcha' got in there this trip, Gary?"

"Oh, you know," our new good friend said. "You know..." And gave a sly, self-deprecating twinkle. He gazed fondly at the tub, smiled at it, nodded once or twice, and almost seemed on the verge of humming a little private tune. Suddenly he threw up his hands and squealed with laughter. "It's peanut butter, it's peanut butter, it's peanut butter, sit!" However, it wasn't peanut butter.

VELVET SEW

BY BENJAMIN SCHACHTMAN

I. DAY TWO

A world of sand, dried shell of the prehistoric ocean. Everything the color of hot metal. Eyes baked shut, sounds sharp: rust in the swivel-joint of his rifle strap; measured breathing; diesel sloshing. I picture his face. Nose like a fist with one knuckle raised, gnarled fat over bone. It reminds me of something, another thought that appears and vanishes, as I once saw footprints washed away on a beach.

I feel a fly land on my skin. I wait. No bite. I resist anthropomorphizing. Yet the thought occurs: this fly is, within certain limits, a very patient creature.

It is waiting for me to die.

Solar apogee. A slab of stone: oblong basalt rising above the sand. He orbits the rock, stopping three times to kneel, one hand raised to the sun, one hand holding a weapon. Satisfied, he motions for me to set the jug down. He begins disrobing, gesturing for me to follow. I remove my jacket and reach for my tie. Not there. Where? An image: soft, pink bone marrow; blinding shard of bone. A young boy. I cannot quite remember what happened.

He stares despite the sun. I remove my shoes, mirror-shined yesterday, now sandblasted dull. Between the tongue and eyelets, a piece of scalp. The hair is matted flat like crushed moss.

Inside, smooth and white. It reminds me of a seashell, something I found at the ocean's edge a long time ago.

Naked, I step away. He soaks the clothing with fuel, lights a flare. The clothing crackles, the flames themselves invisible. Beneath the veil of fire, we watch the oxidation: vortexes of chemical reaction, gorging on their own heat, shaking off the artifice of order imposed on them.

Another sentimentality. Perhaps dehydration. Sunstroke.

Ashes remain. He allows me to sit on the scalding rock, my shadow directly proportionate to my body. He does not notice or appreciate this. Our skins burn.

Slowly, our shadows stretch out towards the edge of the rock, then beyond.

We do not talk.

Optical illusion: the sun swells into a red giant. He considers his weapon, held gently across his palms, as a child might hold a wounded animal. He ejects a single round, pockets it, and stands up. He sucks in a breath, holds it, fires a round and breathes out. He maintains this sensual rhythm until the weapon is empty. He stares at the sun until it disappears.

One of the soldiers, at the end of the first day, recalled for me how his father had once told him a story, on the night the soldier himself had become a father. The point of the story was this: no man can become a father until his own father is dead. However, sometimes sons do not accept the death of their fathers and thus cannot become fathers to their own sons. In the story, the sun represented his father, or perhaps all fathers, and the sun's final magnificence at the end of day was a burst of inexplicable rage, to anger or frighten the son, so that he might allow his father to die. The soldier's father had been a poet, but the soldier was not. I am not sure I understood the story, and the soldier did not live long enough to explain it to me, if he himself understood it at all.

The sky turns blue, then black. He loads the final round into his pistol.

Then he remembers his rifle. He removes the firing pin, swallows it, laughs.

It startles me, so much like the sound of speech. It is flesh and bone of the body, as a piano is wood and wire. When last have I heard either? The fly returns. Another thought occurs: in dying, I may become quite sentimental.

Ambient temperature decreases. Stars appear. He drinks the last of the water. Thirty milliliters. Perhaps forty. Not enough to see either of us through the day that is to come.

He picks up the pistol and stands.

—She came to me last night.

He circles, facing me. He grabs the jug, returns to his seat.

—When I was alone, by the edge of the desert. Before you came to me about the boy. She told me about you, who you are, what you are doing here. She told me, so I know, and I wanted you

to know.

He opens the jug.

–She told me. I asked. She answered.

He lifts the jug, pours diesel down over his face, sputtering and coughing. He keeps the pistol pointed in my direction but I suspect the fumes have blinded him.

–She told me everything.

He looks at me, blank red eyes that see nothing.

–Why?

I stand up, slowly. He can still make out shadows, or can hear, and lifts the pistol slightly. He wipes his face with his forearm. It appears to do nothing. Or make things worse. The skin around his eyes and nose is going pink and puffy. I remember what I had been thinking earlier, about his nose. Something someone had told me once, about the evolution of man: that northern people had high, long and thin noses, that warmed the cold air before it got into their bronchial passages, and that southern people had wide, round nasal passages, that allowed air to cool. A symptom of design: elegant, delicate tinkering.

An old thought. Before the belatedness, the knowledge of randomness, entropy. Every living thing a botched copy of the botched copy before it. Sometimes: a mistake, an accident. Dumb luck. Some thing lives slightly longer than some other thing. Long enough to mate a few more times before it dies, to pass on a few more mistakes. A spasm in the dirt: no elegance, no meaning.

He looks at me and he is crying. Perhaps from the fumes.

–Why?

I tell him, in a way.

–It was a dream.

He is quiet. His mouth blisters.

–I will never have that dream again.

Something happens, a small motion of his wrist. A sound as faint as an air bubble popping on the surface of a pond. Then he is a roaring sphere of flame around a blazing point of red light. A primitive hieroglyph for the word ‘god’.

There is a sound, not like a scream but not like anything else. A gunshot. The flame collapses into a puddle of smoke. The smell of burning flesh.

Standing naked, painted by firelight, this is how she must see me when she appears.

–Is it what you hoped for?

II. DAY ONE

As the helicopter landed, a boy ran towards us. His left foot came down into a spray of rock

and sand. There was a nearly comical noise, flat and insubstantial. A strange, hollow recreation of a war were it not for the boy, sitting by the edge of the clearing, one leg terminated—abruptly as a spiral ham—at the thigh.

One solider nudged the soldier next to him and laughed.

—He'll never dance again.

They looked at me, perhaps hoping I would laugh. I felt distantly shamed; even the bleakest jokes imply some communion with your audience.

There was no medical kit on board the helicopter. The reason for the lapse was not explained, instead, their leader simply sent the helicopter back to the airbase. He walked over to boy and looked down at him without squatting or removing his sunglasses.

—Well, shit. I thought we swept those fuckers up.

I took off my tie and held it out.

—The fuck you want to do with this?

—Tourniquet. We can tourniquet his leg.

—We can, huh?

He laughed.

—You ain't been here too long, have ya?

I shook my head. The solider looked at me, the boy, and then the solider standing over him. It was hard to read their expressions beneath helmets and sunglasses. I counted nearly forty heartbeats, spurted out onto a small patch of scraggly grass. The solider exhaled sharply and grabbed my tie.

—Alright, J_____, let's try and stop the bleeding.

As they tightened the tourniquet, the boy threw up and then passed out again. They walked away from his body and picked up my suitcases. The two remaining soldiers picked up the boy's limp body and we walked to camp, a semicircle of long tents. No one talked, except when the soldier in front of me turned and sneered.

—You a reporter? Huh? You here to report what's going on?

I nodded, since it was technically true.

—Well, Cronkite, let me tell you, you haven't been here long at all.

And again I shook my head, and kept shaking it after he turned back to look towards the camp. I realized what he saw: my clothing more absurd than nakedness in this desert and, beneath that, a child's softness, feminine and weak. I felt bad about what he did not see, what I did not say.

As the men carried the boy away, one of them pointed me towards a large man, standing at attention in an olive-green uniform. One of the soldiers chuckled.

—C_____ will be excited to see you.

Compared to the soldiers in the helicopter, the CO looked like someone who might play a

general in a movie about war that did not take war itself seriously, a comedy or romance. He took my hand and smiled warmly.

–I suppose you met B_____, on the ride in? Hope the ride was okay for you.

I nodded.

–He can be a little off-putting, but he’s okay, best Sergeant I’ve had here.

He looked at me for a moment.

–Let’s take a stroll.

We walked along a stretch of rocky outcroppings between two rows of massive vehicles. After a minute, he spoke quietly.

–It’s something chemical? Biological?

–My understanding is mostly tactical.

–Need to know, huh?

I wondered: Equanimity? Or naivety? I shrugged and said nothing.

–Well, shit, I know how it is.

He flashed me a partial smile.

–So you people finally decided you wanted to win this thing, huh?

–The people I work for don’t make that kind of decision.

I handed him a small envelope. He opened and read the letter inside quickly, chuckling to himself. He refolded the letter and stuck it back inside the envelope, tucking it inside his shirt.

–So. You’re my tactical advisor. Okay then, advise me. When?

–Tonight.

His eyes became very bright and he rubbed his face excitedly.

–That is some good fucking news, I tell you, good fucking news.

He looked out at the desert. It was only a speculation, but it seemed to me that he was imagining himself as something titanic, gathering up the ocean of sand and devouring it. He chuckled again after a moment, and spoke:

–You’ve made me a very happy man.

We stood in silence for a time, I don’t know how long. C_____ thought of himself, gorged on the world, and I thought of myself, child-like, hiding in the stacks of a small-town library. I spent much of my life alone in places like that, studying movies and plays, novels and poems, the whole dramatic record of humanity. And, as I understood it, the most fundamental characteristic of humanity was the failure to understand dramatic irony. The epitaph for the world, the epigram to this story: they failed to understand just how deeply they failed to understand.

After deploying the weapon, C_____ assigned watch to B_____ and went to his tent, prepared, as he told me, to awake to victory. The soldiers continued to celebrate. One of them, whom I recognized from the helicopter, approached me outside the tent.

—Hey, Cronkite. Yeah, you, reporter. Don't you want to ask me some questions?

I nodded. I did, in fact, have preliminary observations to make. The man put his hand out.

—J_____. Sorry about before, we lose some of our polish out here. You know? No offense.

—None taken.

He smiled.

—Well alright, come get a drink with us.

There were a half dozen soldiers in the tent, most sitting and standing around the table.

B_____ was sitting on the edge of his cot, disassembling a pistol. He looked up and handed

J_____ a clear plastic sports bottle full of a pale reddish liquid. B_____ himself was not drinking anything.

—Hey guys, Cronkite here wants to ask us some questions. For, uh, what did you say? The *Times*?

One soldier grumbled.

—Like what? Like how proud we are of the mission? Whether we'll be home in time for Thanksgiving or if we'll have to wait for Christmas?

A few soldiers laughed. J_____ looked at me.

—Well?

—Perhaps you might say something about what you miss back home, what you're fighting for, why you're here?

Several soldiers laughed and chimed in.

—To shell the enemy into submission.

—Fucking A.

—Bringing them democracy from across the valley.

—I mean, on a personal level.

Most of them chuckled when I said 'personal level'. A few cheered.

—Daddy was a military man.

—Grandpop too. Military man.

—Hell, my momma was a military man.

Everyone except B_____ laughed. He was reassembling the pistol now; I had a strange premonition, but shook it off. Someone grabbed the drink from J_____ and took a long swallow. He looked down at the table and spoke.

—We all know how it is. Pops never talked about it, never said a word. When I was in high-school, I had to write this paper. Like a book report, on a person, on like our hero or whatever, whatcha call it—

—It's a biography, M_____, goddamn your dumb, black ass.

—Fuck yourself, J_____. Fuck yourself, and when you're good and loose, I'll get in there.

—Best you had. Not just out here. Best you ever had.

The group laughed again.

—Well, my dumb black ass goes home and I figure I'll talk to pops about the war.

—Cuz he’s your hero. Christ, that’s touching. You sentimental cunt-rag.
 Someone snorted. J_____ apologized. B_____ looked directly at me and finished attaching the slide to his pistol.

—My pops’ in the garage and I go in there and just ask ‘em. What was Vietnam like?

Laughter. B_____ was methodically pressing rounds into a clip.

—I know. And my pops wipes the grease off his hands, sets himself down on a crate and says, ‘shit, son, it was nice. Nice place, pretty women, cheap beer, and they had some good fucking soup. I gotta tell you, good fucking soup’. Then he kicked my ass out the garage and went back to work. So I wrote that up. For my high school paper, ‘My father said Vietnam had some good fucking soup’. Teacher tore my ear off. Sent my dumb ass home to rewrite the paper. So I ask my pops again, ‘That’s all you can say about the war, they had good soup?’ And he looks at me like I’m not even his own child, like I’m a headless stump, and he says, ‘I didn’t say anything about the war son.’ And I’m still standing there with my pencil and my paper, asking ‘but you said that in Vietnam...’ and he cuffed me across the face. He said, and I won’t never forget this shit, ‘Son, your father went to war and he came back. That’s a motherfucking miracle. But I ain’t talking about it. I don’t know if there’s anything to say. But I can tell you this, the war ain’t had nothing to fucking do with Vietnam. I don’t know where the fuck we went, where the fuck we where for that year, but it wasn’t no fucking Vietnam. I been to Vietnam, like I told you. They had some mighty good soup.’

One of the older soldiers had tears on his face from laughing. J_____ slapped him on the arm.

—That’s one well adjusted grunt. M_____, your pops was hard core.

—I don’t know man. Pop thinks he fought a war in fucking never-never land. Got in a fucking Chinook and flew to fucking Narnia.

J_____ laughed and nodded. He took the bottle back and finished it slowly. Then he spoke.

—Well, my senior year, my dad gave himself a haircut with a Mossberg. Half a life-time that fuse burnt. You imagine that? Thirty five years he sat in a rocking chair. Probably had both barrels loaded the whole time. Not a word. Waiting for the other shoe to drop or something. I went to school, my mom went to work, and then he did it in the basement. When I got home the cops had made the living room *upstairs* a crime scene. Picture that, M_____. Picture me, seeing that. Tell me how well adjusted *that* is. Tell me your pops didn’t hang in there just fine.

The room was quiet for a minute. B_____ inserted the clip into his pistol. The noise crackled in the still air. Finally, he coughed quietly and stood up. He looked at J_____ for a minute and then turned and walked out of the room. One of the soldiers finally spoke.

—Man, that was a real weird fucking story.

J_____ and M_____ exchanged glances and shrugged. I had recorded both stories. The room was quiet until M_____ chuckled and professed his love for J_____. Then the rest of the soldiers broke out laughing. Another bottle of pale red liquid appeared. I turned to follow B_____ outside when J_____ called to me.

—Hey Cronkite. You know what I miss?

I turned and shook my head.

—I miss eating pussy, man. I miss that real bad. More than fucking, or getting sucked off. You ever feel like that? Like it's more sex than sex, when you're down there just laboring away?

I shook my head.

—I swear to you, man, I was down there, this one time, I'm totally in love, I got my face pressed into her, and I must have had most of my hand in there, thumb and pinky all crammed together. And then I had this thought, and I couldn't shake it, I kept thinking, 'I could just crawl back in', you know? You ever feel like that Cronkite?

I was quiet for a minute. J _____ looked at me, flashed his teeth in something quite unlike a smile.

—You have, haven't you?

I shook my head, slowly. The other soldiers were cramping up with laughter.

—Oh Cronkite. Oh Walter! You sick sonofabitch!

Many of the soldiers were laughing too hard to speak, so they merely pointed at me and laughed. It occurred to me, for just a moment, that I no longer felt bad for misleading J _____. A flicker of sentimentality, perhaps, but no one there caught it.

I found B _____, standing on the perimeter of the camp, staring into the empty black space between the floodlit sand and the stars. I stood beside him for a minute or two, wondering if I had been wrong about him.

—How is he?

He was quiet for a minute.

—He'll live. Soaked up a lot of saline, more plasma than I wanted to spare. They'll medivac him out at first light. He'll certainly think twice before he comes round begging again.

—If he lives.

B _____ spat, a dry cough.

—Yeah. If he lives.

I stood there for another moment, listening to him breathe. I looked at his face and he very slowly turned and sneered.

—You don't want the kid to live.

—It's not a matter of want. It's a matter of—

He cut me off. I was surprised, almost startled, by the intelligence of his voice.

—You're taking a big risk. And you know you're taking a risk. You don't seem like the type.

I was quiet for a minute. He licked his lips.

—You're not a reporter. And that shit we put down-range?

I shrugged. He looked back out at the desert.

—Someone's going to have a bad fucking night.

I nodded.

—So the kid...

He turned to me. I said nothing. Slowly he started to nod.

—There's no medivac coming in the morning, is there?

I shook my head. He looked towards the medical tent.

—Yeah. I think I get it. You'd rather do him quick. Better if it's done quick.

The boy was unconscious; his light brown skin had become slick and yellowish, almost pale. The blanket was tucked under his stump, heavily wrapped in gauze, draining into a plastic bag at the foot of the bed. B_____ pointed at the saline drip.

—He'll probably croak without that, might be the easiest way.

I shook my head. He laughed.

—Really? Alright, have it your way.

He took a long knife from a sheath at his waist and handed it to me.

—I didn't think you had it in you.

I shrugged. I cut open the gauze at the termination of the leg. A minor incision within the wound track would re-open the femoral artery. Only a very good coroner would notice and this boy was not going to get a very good autopsy, if he was even found at all. I walked around to the other side of the bed to get a better angle when B_____ stopped me.

—Why you'd save him, then?

—If he had been able to leave... before it was too late. That would have been permissible.

He looked at me and shook his head.

—Permissible. Permissible by who?

I shook my head and gripped the knife when we heard a scream from outside.

A young soldier was kneeling in the middle of the camp grounds cutting the right eye out of his own head with a bayonet. I saw C_____, wrenched from sleep and running blindly, arms out, mouth open in pure parental horror. The young soldier dropped the bayonet, removed his sidearm from his holster and shot C_____ twice, bringing his big body to the ground. Someone screamed, the primal harmony of rage and fear. The young soldier holstered his pistol, picked up the bayonet and finished cutting his other eye out.

B_____ took a rifle from one of the soldiers and shot the young man in the chest. As he slowly lost his grip on the bayonet he turned towards us, eyeless and grinning, and screamed.

—She—

B_____ fired another round, this time through the man's throat, and the man collapsed to the ground. I turned and looked at him. He shouted at me, loud and yet calm.

—What was the effective kill radius?

—It's not technically a lethal—

He pointed the rifle at me and marched me back into the tent. I realized he would not be persuaded by the semantic argument that had allowed the creation of the weapon in the first place. He asked again, quietly this time.

–What’s the kill radius?

I shrugged. He tapped the rifle against my forehead.

–Approximately eighteen kilometers.

He nodded slowly, then shot boy in the head at a downward angle. Pieces of blood and bone smacked against my shin, soaking my pant leg and shoe and I wondered, somewhat abstractly, if the bullet had gone into my leg. B_____ pointed the rifle at me again.

–Outside the kill radius, what’s the chance of recovery?

I shrugged, wondering how far he would walk.

–What are the chances of survival?

And then I said something I was not supposed to say. Something about his face, the strange mix of delicate and brutal in his mouth. A minor sentimentality, but worrisome.

–It’s one of the things I’m here to find out.

B_____ rushed out of the tent. I followed him, walking slowly. M_____ was drowning J_____, holding his head in a burning drum of human shit and diesel fuel. M_____ was laughing, although his own arm was on fire. Another soldier was quietly bleeding out in the center clearing, his abdomen and thighs soaked red. I heard the particular combination of screaming and grunting that almost always accompanies rape. Standing at the edge of the ordinance depot, one of the older soldiers was standing, staring at the sky.

When I approached him he waved, hands covered in blood. Standing next to him was an artillery round.

–She looked so peaceful. It’s been so long, since I’ve seen her. And I can’t believe it, but I’m finally not angry. I just always thought, you know, that I’d never forgive him. But I’m not angry anymore. I’m okay, I guess, because I understand. I just, well, I hope my boy understands.

Then he told me a story about the father and the sun.

And then he walked about thirty meters into the desert and detonated the shell.

By the time B_____ found me I had finished making my official primary observations. As for B_____ himself, I reasoned that he was something of a secondary observation, an anomaly that might be interesting. It was difficult to gauge how he had been affected. There were many different reasons why he might collect a five gallon jug of diesel fuel and march me into the desert at gunpoint; he refused to speak so I was left to speculate.

III. THE BEACH

Very young, yes, very young.

Water: warm, satly.

Sand: a feel that was familiar, holding a weight for a breath and a moment and then collapsing, not quiet yet solid.

Seashells: each one discarded for the next until one, a moss covered shell, pearlescent interior, tucked away, partially hidden, a strange premonition.

Child: holds a dead sparrow, while above gulls caw and circle.

Mother: a voice, woven into the sound of waves

Child: writes words in footprints, watches them erased by the surf, another premonition.

Mother: arms spread, forgets that children do transcend reality quite often

Mother sits watching the sea. She shouts. Where are you? Father strokes her neck. Strokes, then holds, holds her body tight. Holds her tight and her body shakes. Then her body is still.

Child watches, pressed into the warm sand of the dunes. Cannot look. Cannot look away.

Father's face is long and pale, his nose like a knife blade. He stands and takes something from his pocket. He touches one wrist, then switches hands and touches the other. He walks into the sea with his arms held out, he trails behind him two long misty-red banners, like red smoke blown from some strange fire, until the Father falls into the water and the fire is extinguished.

From a distance it looks like ritual, but there is no meaning.

Yet.

Child: I am—

But the sound of the waves washes it away, as it washes away his footprints.

A long, long time ago.

Before movies and plays, before war and death, before faces that hid either souls or burnt meat. Primal history: of this there are only echoes and shadows. But overlap enough echoes and it sounds like a voice, overlay enough shadows and it looks like a man.

Later, alone on the beach.

Child: a bird can die, I can die

A woman like and yet unlike Mother: you will never die

The tastes of salt, skin, water, sky. Warmth. Happiness.

Human. An accident of evolution: the story behind the myth, the deep and impassive space between something and nothing. What dumb luck separated them from mere blood and bone?

What dumb luck separates me now?

I have read about this moment many times. It is the whisper hidden in many stories, stories not meant to be read for what they are about, but for the moment on the beach long, long ago which they echo. Every time I read one of these stories I secretly believe it to be my own.

IV. DAY THREE

She eclipses the rising sun only partially and I cannot look directly at her. Instead I look at the corpse.

–You cared for him.

I am quiet for a minute.

–That is difficult to gauge.

She steps away from the sun. I can look at her now but I still find her difficult to describe. This is not the first time I have seen her, but this time is different. I cannot say how. But she is beautiful, yes. Very beautiful.

–Still you felt something?

–I feel like you are mocking me.

She smiles.

–A little. I am sorry. But I am curious.

–He seemed useful. Interesting.

–Interesting?

–As an object of study.

–That is not quite the truth.

A gentle venom in her voice. A slightly raised eyebrow, as if to say: ‘You are sitting naked in the desert without food or water, attempting to deceive a hallucination.’

I look out to the desert, the sky, then back at her.

–What’s the harm?

She laughs.

–You *are* different than the rest.

It touches me somehow, her remembering, accepting things about herself, though she is more. In our tragedies, we deny what we fear we are becoming, and already we are flowing out even beyond that.

–We are both different.

She imitates my voice and posture.

–I am one of many similar but discrete regression-based hallucinations, triggered by a combination of neurotoxins, psychoactive alkaloids and hormone-reuptake inhibitors.

I step towards her, hold a finger near her lips.

—I think you may have been that, at one time. At first.

She says nothing.

—I was once a child. I saw something that frightened me and I ran away. I was walking on a beach, collecting shells. I found a dead bird and it made me weep until someone found me and comforted me. And she was like you, only not quite.

I touch her face with both hands. Searing pain shuts my eyes, yet I hold my hands to her skin. It is like velvet, like the new skin of wild animal, hot as a blade pulled from the fire.

—I surely was a child once, but that was a long, long time ago.

I feel the fly settle on her face but I brush it away. I allow myself this minor sentimentality: that the fly will have to wait a little while longer.

And then it will have all the world.

DECEMBRE

BY D. E. STEWARD

Macula, macule, mackle

Lamalera on Lembata in Nusa Tenggara Timur, the waxy, coiled lines in the dark rooms, the harpoons aligned

The same in Lamakera on Solor, Nusa Tenggara Timur

Whale watchers along those far Sumbawa tropical waters, waiting for whales

“...the subtleties of the noon sea://lime, emerald, lilac, cobalt, ultramarine.”—Walcott

Vida: Feeling the southwestern sun that is still strong and warm in Andalucía with the rest of Europe already dark

The westernness of it

Upcountry from the Pillars of Hercules awash in that brilliant off-the-straits winter sun

Gazing into its glare as those there did long before the Phoenicians

There is still nothing new even as electronics has brought so many astonishing things

Scant magic left, no mystery, it's all here

And what's not is implicit

Bendan Kennelly's new translation of Martial's most famous epigram:

What constitutes a happy life?
Enough money to meet your needs
steady work
a comfortable fire
a clear distance from law
a minimum of city business
a peaceful mind and a healthy body
simple wisdom and firm friends
enjoyable dinners and plain living
nights free from care
a virtuous wife who's not a prude
enough sleep to make the darkness short
contentment with the life you have
avoiding the sneer, the poisoned sigh;
no fear of death
and no desire to die

"People who talk about the importance of individuality are talking about something else"—
John Bennett

Rural America, where quizzical, observant animal and human consciousness and passion were omnipresent, feels empty now with that all gone into tract housing and factory farms

Calves, kids and lambs gamboled, horses tossed and broke into cross-field gallops, chickens would run around trying to beat one another to an insect in the dust, barn swallows darted and dived, swifts soared

Crows from the shade trees, and barn cats and farm dogs watched it all

Summer evenings when the bigger outside world was unapproachable but imaginable and desirable as you straddled your bike

With no way of knowing then that the bigger world is not actually far out there, is in no way different from yours where you are

That everything you have and do fits into an expansive, interlocking, tenuous whole

That there are more roads and streets with lonely people by them across the world

Live in a single place making the most of it

Then perhaps you can look forward to getting through without suffering the swooping lows of existential vacancies

Nome's webcam shows frozen Norton Sound in the background

A large statue of Roald Amundsen invisible in the webcam stands beneath the camera

Amundsen and Robert Scott, one a careful planner, the other brash and dangerous

After his quick run from the Bay of Whales on the Ross Sea with sled dogs, Amundsen brought his crew back without even a case of frostbite

Scott, from bad planning and trusting to what he called "Providence and luck," died with four other sled-pulling humans after making the South Pole thirty-five days after Amundsen had been there

Sled dogs do not howl when people die

At high latitudes, the ubiquitous northern fulmars search and hover

At the northern limit of Kamchatka, at the head of Bukhta Dezhneva, at the mouth of the Ukelayat, gravel bars and volcanic-black sand lie along the surging river

On the lookout for bears after coming ashore there

Five degrees off the equator in Tanga, watched the bushbabies (small-eared galagos) scurry

along the telephone wire, and in bright moonlight could sometimes make out the eyes of the most recent common ancestor of we surviving primates

Now and then one of them would pause and stare at me staring up at it from below

Then shriek and tear away into the deep black, making stupendous leaps from the wire off into the palms

Assertive, remarkable acts

Bon courage

As Muldoon's *Medoc* and Walcott's *Omeros*, two great modern epic poems

Books ready on the most important furniture of our lives

Our nightstands, first thing in the morning, last thing of the evening

Night table, bedside tables, *table de chevet*, *mesilla de noche*, *der Nachttisch*, *cabecera*, *mesa de cabeceira*, *compagne de nuit*

Notebook, phone, a glass from the last drink of the night, cigarettes, pot, meds, pills, snacks, rubbers, flashlight, radio, MP3 player, gun or knife or pepper spray, reading glasses, a remote for those who have a TV pointed at them in bed, pockets' contents, keys and change, pens, pencils, objects of contemplation, photographs, reading light, unfinished reading

Most of us will die with a nightstand beside

We reach toward them when waking

In the darkness agape at the two dimensions of the world's complexity, what is here among our seven billion now, and the past, what was for the steady million or so populating the earth before agriculture, and then all that was from the first empires when ancient China alone had over a hundred million

Imagining the Anatolian roads of the Romans, the Persians, and the Hittites before them

Mycenae's Lion Gate, the Treasury of Atreus, in place thirty-two centuries ago

À la Jean-Luc Godard, a beginning, a middle, and there will be an end, but not necessarily in that order

Shin Beth in the old days, and as an old man was still in the Shabak mold of that ugly Israel teeming with cops, soldiers and guards

And like many of his ilk, he was parlous, greedy and supposititious in everything he did

Das Leben der Anderen

Racism, sexism, ageism, hereditarianism

Impossible for those who are orthodox anything to understand their belief's illogics

Cheney was to us like Bismarck was to Germany

Baleful mien, threatening presence

As we're beset all over again by American triumphalism

An anorexic wife appears to report to her husband, "Ozone alert right now in Connecticut"

Over his shoulder to her, "That the same as global warming?"

Why no more satyagraha?

Why terrorism?

Why suicide bombing?

Why thousands and thousands of suicide bombers?

Our manner of knowing flattens, overplays, panders, enforces the banal

Whereas Neolithic intensity of awareness was extreme, enhanced by ignorance of what changed things around them

Typically being forever young, they kept their phosphene-flash innocence until death,

so may have ignored the implications of mortality in so much of what they did

The short seasons of their strengths made them young forever within a splendid world

Dogs live happily for their dozen years

Good doors close quietly and futons unroll smoothly on tatami

The variable currents of the Dardanelles slap into the clean-washed Gallipoli landing beaches

In the undergrowth behind the sand, are remnants, rusted steel, the junk of combat

The same waters and their variable currents wash the shore below the mound of Troy and its walls within sight on the other side

Macula, macule, mackle

Everywhere whale watchers waiting for whales



DANIEL CARTER

GHOST [SULFUR]

We're under water, I said to you, —*come see our dim smoke signal*. I said come rescue—also how green light filters down to coal. Come rescue, and I can tell it to you. How what I thought was chemical burns and a painful touch never hit me hard enough. How I asked to trade my breath for sand and how what he left couldn't strike a deal.

Through glass he offered me a light, said he could lick my feet. How he would take my empty sheets and make a body out of me. Would tie me in knots and wire weights so I could walk your grounds and trim the roses. You never heard me skirt the shingles or turned to a maiden at my touch, but I would ask for a strong chain and try hard to be held up.

Before, you asked me what I thought I'd give—to stretch between the grass and earth, so far I sometimes tear. You never thought I'd make it down to ask for just one more. How he would hang me heavy like a window. And how I would cross the widow's walk, shuffling low and married to lead.

GHOST [HOLIDAY]

Tonight it's calling from the trees: a sign that I could live a backward life. Tonight any body is up for grabs—but waking's always bloody. Like something crawls out of the sea and knows air before morning finds it unnamed, misshapen. Like a king sheds his coat to hang in an alley. Like me in the closet, marking something special with a stab. Like once she's gone and we share a wink at the iron gate: like how I loved her satin sheets and how she thrilled to know the touch he lent her.

But still more like dancing with the forest king and how his hooves will catch you in your eyes, the image of caressing past given over to the coming run through torn sheets and burning trees. And how that plot will be rewound—a dark mound shudders, and a crowd begins to slice the real man from the imagined beast. Run through the trees and shattered glass, he picks up her pieces, climbs out the window and disappears.

TRANSMITTING BABEL

I come again
& again & each time different
so you can know me better—
like here is a bird
I bring, here is the virus,
here coded glory
singing in all my fiber-optic
hearts—here error-
seeping analog converging
on everything that is good
& blaring.

& I am
 the hand on the radar
 gun. Touch me, touch
 my trigger—every time
 you play roulette with me
 you win. & I am never-
 stopping knocking—every
 ghost loves my machine.
 I am telling jokes to the dead
 daughter's parents—
 here I am & am I here?

I am

channeled & have fallouts,
 secrets coded & never come
 home—I am bounded
 & excessive, I have songs
 I only sing to material things
 —copper: *I am fallen—*
 ocean: *I will swim through*
you—vacuum: & you
will hold my secrets still.
 Sorry—even here

I am not

guilty of trick ending—just
 reiteration, return, rewind
 in case of epilepsy.
 Did you seize? I try again:
 I am the wave & the medium,
 I am leaking carrier pigeons.
 Less than whole but more
 than the message, I am
 fallen from that solid
 state, & I am dreaming

I return.

MILLER'S RIDGE [I]

Frank, I'm just so confused. I need someone to hold me when I don't know where to turn—and you've shown signs of a wandering eye. Lonely Hearts is the episode, and O'Connell's always on camera, looking at you. You know it's him by the pen in his pocket—oversized and neon blue and lifted in Season

Two, before anybody really cared. Now it's Season Four, and he's playing a detective. He's holding a gun to a priest's collar, but that pocket's always there, so steady and neon and blue—it shows, you think, that the three phantom episodes stuck in Season Four might have been real—or you

dreamed them up, weeping and stoned, when you missed an episode and felt blue. The credits for Season One, *Tell Me Two Times*, missed a few episodes, you know, and what's increasingly coming to hold your worries is a recurring dream of the show as a bad book—and you a poor accountant. In that pocket,

too, there's a clue even you missed. Second viewing: the pocket opens, and there it is. *Hello, Miller—we're here for your treatment*. Mental illness: it's a classic turn, the show's way to start over again. That was true even when Season One aired: O'Connell the Dreamboat holding a firm course for O'Connell the Derelict. The last episode

only aired once, and most people missed it, but the episode following introduced an identical twin. Two pockets, two seasons: almost like an identity that could hold through covert ops and romantic trickery like you have never seen—but would like to. Season One, *Never-Heard Tales for the Lonely*, had one show

in which the devil sent two brothers, told them to show the town a good time—*sinister smile*. Next episode the brothers are gone, but there's an alternate season about them and O'Connell lost in a hospital. He pockets a syringe, and when he starts to fight the devil's twins, you wonder about that pocket and whether what it holds

will hold true until the show returns from what you hope is just a false episode, a tricky pocket in Season Four.

MILLER'S RIDGE [II]

The camera blinks, but he holds on—he knows what can happen when you dim the lights and close the closet door. So he lingers on the changing set, asks, *So, you're an actor too?* He's not too modest to stop work, look up into a mirror, grin. Now, in coveralls, he's playing the furniture

mover, tomorrow the actor's twin. *Careful, furniture man, not to forget who you've been.* He's known, around the set, for what he calls mirroring takes—for playing at the camera's edge, close enough to tip-toe over the line—close enough to steal the best shot. Later, in the actor's changing

room, a confrontation: *But we'd have to change episodes one and three. Kid, you're just furniture for my lines. You're a chair—and I can shoot two as easy as one.* The villain gains a limp, and nobody really cares which plot never got closed. Here, recast seasons are like funhouse mirrors—

here a clown, there a villain: all flawed mirrors,
 giving back what you want to see, the change
 you'd love to sink low and embrace. So close
 your eyes; he's setting the scene with furniture
 you always wanted to try—like velvet curtains known
 to make stars swoon. And if a pearly chaise isn't too

gaudy a savior, you'll have your pick of two.
 The furniture mover knows about gilt mirrors
 and what they mean: romance so serious that no
 one believes it will last a season, a last second change
 in the form of a bloody mask—it's the basic furniture
 of melodrama that makes him swing so close

to murderous plots. *Now swing up real close
 to that mirror, he'll say, and give me a shot of two
 eyes meeting for the first time.* A howl, and furniture
 shoots across the floor. Then, shot through the mirror,
 a dresser slams into the door. The show's changing
 room flickers, shows his face, and the viewers know—

have always known—how close they are to this change,
 to the man in the mirror and his trick furniture.

AUTOMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING OF THE BODY

BY BRANDI WELLS

The diagnostic specialist says when he was a young boy he used to be a bird.

Of course, I say. Of course.

No really, he says. I was a bird. A very regular bird. You know those birds you see in the park and someone says, what kind of bird is that, but no one knows because it just looks like a regular type of bird? Not distinctive. Just a bird.

And then what happened, I ask.

Well, he says. One day I just wasn't a bird anymore. For a lot of days after that I kept expecting to be a bird, but I never woke up to be a bird again. Sometimes I still expect it, but it's more of a desire than a wish.

There were days when rationale mattered. When one thing happened and then another thing and another. These things seemed to flow organically into each other. Anyone could predict what was going to happen next. They called this the science. But the science has broken down over the years, gone into disrepair, become impossible to use. The people railed against the science and called it religion, which was the dirtiest word. They destroyed the banks and the churches and the congress houses and sometimes the waffle houses, but this of course was a mistake. Afterwards there were no more waffles and the science and religion and waffles were forever lost.

A local museum keeps my cunning below glass and shines a non-damaging light on it. Always the museum is packed. My cunning is the only display. The building is several miles wide and long and high, but is completely empty except for my beautiful cunning. At least twice a month, someone tries to steal my cunning but they are never successful. Failures, every time. These fail-

ures are dragged out into the street and chopped into small pieces and buried in the earth. In this way the earth is becoming more of a failure each year. It makes me nervous, but feels necessary to promote my own sort of growth.

I do egregious wrong and it is harder than I imagined it would be. I keep committing tiny wrongs.

Your wrongs are so small, people say. They laugh and cover their faces with their hands and I feel embarrassed over my very small wrongs. I try harder. I wake every day with new plans for egregious wrongs and I become more successful. I give small children tiny kittens and then I use the tiny kittens to murder other, cuter tiny kittens and then I kill the original kittens. Someone suggests that using such tiny kittens means my wrongs are still very small, but I zap the kittens with a laser that make the kittens very large and therefore my wrongs are also very large and these people are wrong, so wrong, because pretty quickly my giant mutated kittens have ripped their fucking faces and arms off and I am laughing and maybe kind of hungry.

I cannot stop thinking about his neck, so I do something about it. I cut into it and begin unraveling it like very delicious and wet yarn.

I am not making sweaters, I say. But I am making neck bone soup. There will not be enough to share because there is never enough to share. Neck bone soup simply isn't the sort of dish you share. But, I say, I promise I will add rosemary to the dish. I do not want it to be offensive to you. I think your ideas and recipes are important.

I am surrounded by birds who demand to be provided with food. I provide each bird with another bird. You eat that one, I say, pointing. And you eat that one and you eat that one. And the final bird, I will eat that bird and it will be like I am eating every bird.

My attempted egregious wrongs find me and do things to me. They come in the dark which is when egregious wrongs come. It is clichéd but egregious wrongs are often clichéd. It is hard to be new and different and egregiously wrong. This is understood and reasonable. No one is upset about it. No one holds it against the wrongs or those who commit them.

The egregious wrongs are my egregious wrongs. (I recognize them. I remember them because they are mine. It is like children. It is no different). They try to hold me down. They try to pin my body to the bed, but I do not feel pinned. I don't feel trapped or contained or restrained. It feels like what I thought love-making would amount to. When I was a child and love-making sounded like a beautiful and romantic thing. Before I knew it was a horror and would amount to this holding down and weight. They crush me, but the crushing is not final. It is not comprehensive. I cannot be crushed because these egregious wrongs are a part of me.

I roll onto them. Their crushing is the sound of acorns crunching on the sidewalk and it is beautiful. People stop to peer in my window and watch the crushing.

That's beautiful, a woman says.

I know, I say. It always is.

And they are crushed completely, into a fine powder and I lap them up. Press spit-slicked fingers against the powder and suck the powder off my fingers. The taste now is something else.

Something more likable and fulfilling.

The diagnostic specialist has disassembled himself. He is in parts strewn all across the bathroom. Torso strung out and neatly separated into pieces. Bones laid in rows from largest to smallest, widest to thinnest. Organs lined up in order of importance and attractiveness. His disassembly is complete and meticulous. It is the most successful disassembly I have ever seen and probably the most successful one that has ever occurred.

I spend a great deal of time worrying about wolves. Wolf prevention, wolf attraction, wolf indebtedness, wolf power, wolf pouncing, wolf timing, wolf cycles, wolf sex, wolf gods, wolf politics, wolf responses, wolf reflexes, wolf sight, wolf smell, wolf sensation. But none of these things are important.

I place an ad in the paper, searching for a replacement lover and a string of people send me letters. All of the letters are blank, but this doesn't seem out of line with the ad I placed, which was really just me thinking about placing an ad and never actually doing it. This has always been the way I handle business and it has proved highly effective in the past.

She does not care. I think she drips more to spite me. To spite the lack of everything. And I don't know how to leave her here, not after she survived the burning. Not after she dripped on ash and looked at everything open and empty-mouthed. So I pick her up and hold her tightly against me.

I spend many hours worrying about his possible underground movements. He might find ways to grow appendages underneath the earth. He might develop arms and legs and new appendages that are more impressive than arms or legs. He might gather strength from the soil. From earthworms and of course, from the hamburgers. He might regrow lips. He might grow stronger muscles and skins and become entirely unmanageable. I have been managing things for so long now. These things frighten me, keep me awake long hours and ruin my concentration. After hours of walking I am not certain I know where I am. I mean, there is still the rosemary and the earth and my feet moving me, but that doesn't feel like enough. And I do not know what enough feels like.

I wonder if the ocean lies underneath the earth, having been trapped there by man many years ago, but this seems unlikely. Many things seem unlikely though, so I do not let this deter me. Anything is possible. If I had robotic arms I would tunnel into the earth. If I was a bird I would use my sharp beak to make some sort of headway. I look at my hands and they seem not enough. Not strong enough. Not complicated enough. Simple tools for someone with a simple mind.

I want to teach my body. I do not want an automatic environmental learning of the body. I do not want to mirror other bodies' movements. I do not want any other person to determine which direction blood runs through my veins. I want to make these decisions for myself.

The education of the body should be slow. It should be a determined thing, mapped out and well planned. I will instruct my arms on which direction they ought to grow. I will be certain my leg growth is correct and balanced. Blood flow will be passionate. Bone growth will be passion-

ate. All of my organs, passionate. Passionate lungs and spleen and liver and heart and kidneys and intestines. My intestines will be the most passionate intestines and my intestines will be admired

I will feel glad I have not buried him because now I have someone to admire my intestines. I pull out my intestines and rub them on his body, in a way where I am also trying to educate his body. My organs have grown so intuitive and passionate and functional that they can teach other organs.

I wish I could find her body so I could begin a similar sort of education. I walk with him through the rosemary, looking up the stalks and calling out for her, but she has no ears that I can recall. And her body, as my body, has become partially rosemary. But if I could instruct her body, it would be more than rosemary, just as I am more than rosemary and doubt.

I burn my house to the ground because it is the only way to start over and be rid of everything. It is harder to burn down a house than I thought. There are a dozen false starts and the fire keeps going out. In movies the house always goes up in flames and burns and burns. But mine flickers out. And flickers out and flickers out. It takes me weeks to successfully burn everything to the ground. And after it's over I worry all the flickering might have created a sort of house that I can't see or feel or experience properly without an appropriate flickering.

And in the ashes, I find her, still breathing and dripping and needing things. I thought I would be done with you, I tell her. I tell her all the tiny child arms are gone. And the tub full of ice and the couches and the child attached to the couch. All of this, I tell her, all of this is gone.

Lonely is smeared across her face and I know she has been eating it whenever she is by herself. Bits of soggy foam in the corner of her lips. Stuck between her teeth. Her lips and teeth stained that color, the color of loneliness. And a smell from her mouth stronger than garlic or the taste of pennies or animal excrement. Pungent with the ability to travel, the ability to fill a room.

I hate to think of her alone in any room, in any place, putting that disgusting mess inside her body. Squirreling it away to use and ENJOY as she pleases. I hate to think of her eating it, thinking she needs to eat it, thinking she has to eat it. Thinking her actions are normal and required and that no one notices, because oh shit I notice. I fucking notice.

I try to fill the room. I pull my body into new shapes, large shapes. I stretch it however I can. I inflate skin and organs. Blow my lungs up like balloons. I rest and then as I heal, I stretch more. I fill more. I drink gallons of water and swallow mouthfuls of air. There is so much air inside my body. And I begin to expand. I float a few inches above the room and take up almost all of the space.

But there in the corner, there's still room for her to hold lonely against her. To rub her face in it. To nibble it when she thinks I am not looking.

I am always looking, I tell her and I look at her for hours.

Always, I tell her. Always.

She hoards lonely. I have seen her, watched her eating it for so long that lonely is desirable

again. I smack my lips thinking of its texture, its taste, its strong smell. I can't look away. I can't quit thinking about the ways I want to put the lonely inside of me.

So I take lonely and do sexual things to it that will make her not want it anymore. I rub the lonely on my body. I rub lonely on my body. I rub my body. I rub. My body.

What are you doing with the lonely, she asks. What are you doing with lonely?

I don't answer. Instead, I show her. See, I say. I go like this?

Yes, she says.

And like this, I say.

Please stop, she says.

Or like this? And sometimes I go like this?

She covers her eyes, but I don't let that stop me. I keep doing what I know how to do because I am good at it and I have always thought skills should be more appreciated. More valued.

You are not valuing me, I tell her. Please value me.

So she tries to value me. It is a sad thing. It is forced and contrived and lacking in all the ways anything might be found lacking.

She creates a series of bright yellow price tags and writes different values on them. One dollar. Forty-seven dollars. One hundred and three dollars. A hundred cakes. A man who has eaten a hundred cakes. A man that knows the value of a hundred cakes.

Stop there, I tell her. We both know there is no such man. I rub my belly and shake my head at her.

She places her hand on my belly and watches while I eat the bright yellow price tags.

She wants lonely back.

Why would you want it back, I ask. What would you do with it? You weren't utilizing it fully. It was wasteful. I think you are sad and wasteful.

She tries to take back the lonely, but I work to make it less desirable. I drag it through mud, but she does not care. I insert it fully into myself and pull it out, but she doesn't care. I search for people so these people can spit on it, but I never find any people.

She tells me she would not care if everyone spit on it and that she just wants it back. It is hers and I took it and she wants it back.

MANEKI NEKO

BY LAUREN GOODMAN

Okaasan had gone long ago and when *Otousan* died, the man with the long limp whiskers and pointed nails was the only one left. And because there was no one else, he was left the small wooden house and the book of women. The man was left alone and free to take the name he wanted to take and the name he took was a name in English. The name he took—Mr. Cat, the name he had been waiting to say out loud—was not a name *Otousan* would have allowed. Mr. Cat kept the house and the book of women, but he threw away the note *Otousan* had left behind.

Okane wa kabe ni aru. Neko wa dame da yo.

The money is in the walls. Don't let the cats in.

But Mr. Cat had been waiting to let the cats in. He slid the back wooden sliding door open wide enough for the widest cat to slip through and he waited for them to come. Mr. Cat put bowls of chicken broth on the path that led to his house and inside he left small silver fish to dry and shrink in the sun and the cats came. A woman brought fresh milk and groceries once a week and Mr. Cat paid with the money from the walls and more and more, the cats came.

Late in the afternoons, when the sunlight began to slip away from the house, Mr. Cat touched the faces of the women in the book of women and when he wrote letters to the women he wrote them in English. He did not know their names. He knew their page numbers and he knew the shape of their lips and he knew their height, the size of their breasts and the yellow, the red, the black, the brown of their hair. He knew the letters had far to travel. Mr. Cat did not know if the women liked cats or if they could read the language in which he wrote to them.

Mr. Cat kept one hand on the crooked back of the one-eyed cat and with the other he touched the faces of the women on the pages and he purred. And all around him cats purred and stretched and hissed and howled. Sometimes, he switched on the *karaoke* machine, and he sang too. Mr. Cat kept the sliding door open a cat-sized crack through the winter so that the cats would have a warm home and so that he would have the warmth of them.

And through the winter he waited and there were no letters from the women. The wind blew through the house and the cats must have told the other cats about how warm it was inside because there were always more cats, and more. The house had three rooms and five windows and pressed against the pane of every window was a pile of cats. Hairless cats, fat orange cats, skinny gray cats, pregnant cats that dragged their heavy bodies over the uneven floor. Big brown ones crowded the doorways, their rough pink mouths always open, wanting, calling, biting him when he reached to touch them. Mother cats nursed kittens in the closets. Cats slept on cats in the bathtub and Mr. Cat slept with his legs curled beneath the *kotatsu*, content, for then, to press his face to the warm bellies of the cats that clawed their way further into the heat of him.

But spring came and still no letters from the women from the book. By then he had named all the pictures. Cat and Catherine and Katrina and Kitty. Mr. Cat felt fine on all fours, lapping milk from the bowl he left for the big brown cats. He felt fine waiting for letters in his house in the company of cats, though fine was not the same as good and the company of cats was not the same as the company of women.

And as the weather warmed and the cats no longer needed the inside he offered, Mr. Cat was every night more and more alone. He put the *kotatsu* into a closet where before there were cats and Mr. Cat took to sleeping by the open sliding door where he could hear the sounds of the cats outside. Darker and darker into the night he heard the male cats howl louder and louder. He heard the struggling, the high sounds of the woman cats, of their heat. Mr. Cat ached alone in the dark in a puddle of warm, wet spring breeze and listened as the cats outside thrashed and spat and thumped and rolled. He wanted it too, the lovemaking.

So Mr. Cat went to the place where so many of his letters had gone. He took the money from the walls and left the house to the cats and went to Ukraine, to Kharkov, to the address printed beneath the pictures, to the place where the women from the book of women were alive and open and for sale.

He felt free there, in those Kharkov basements, in those cold cement rooms, on those squeaking sagging single beds, in the arms of those women whose skin he washed with his tongue. Mr. Cat felt most free with her, with the one woman covered in soft golden hair with ears ending in points, the one he had named Kitty, the one who understood what he wanted, who purred for him for hours, for U.S. dollars. He paid the price printed under Kitty's picture in the book and she became his. Mr. Cat spoke English to her and she did not speak. He bought two tickets back to the home where he said a surprise waited to see her. A surprise of love and cats that belonged to the house, to him, to her. They stood in the sun and shared a cold bottle of milk and he pet her soft head as she drank. And the last he saw of his Kitty was her hair shining as she ran, tall and

fast and two-legged, through the crowded street and around a corner into that same swallowing hole of Kharkov where all his letters must have also disappeared.

Mr. Cat returned home alone to the cats, and what he promised the cats was that he would never leave them, that he would not write another letter or ever again open the book of women.

And the cats had done to the house what cats let in and left alone will do to a house. The cats had clawed down the curtains and scratched up the floors. The cats had eaten all they could eat in the house and then the cats had turned to cannibals. Big cats had eaten small cats and fast cats had caught slow cats. Mr. Cat cleaned up the mess of cats and put out proper food for the cats left intact. The cats attacked the food and Mr. Cat sang *karaoke* over the sound of their swallowing. His song was not about the making and taking of love or about where he had been. His song was something about the dark and the autumn coming and the hunger of cats. Mr. Cat set the beat on repeat so his song would have no end. He did not sing in English. He did not sing in words. He wailed, he growled, he spat and cried and hissed.

Night laid down over the house and Mr. Cat stretched out on the floor. There was no breeze, only air heavy on his bare skin. The fish he rubbed over and into his body and the scent spread and the cats came at once. Mr. Cat stretched wider, arms open, made more of himself and more and more. Pouncing and biting and chewing and scratching and hissing and purring and licking. So many small sandpaper tongues and the bite of tiny tack teeth. The cats covered him in a blanket of moving fur. Still more poured into the room and he sang to them from under them. Mr. Cat sang in a language they could understand, sang about the soft tips of ears and not at all about Kitty, not about how much she must have been missing this home he had told her about, this home he had for her here, this home so warm, alive, writhing.



THE INESCAPABLE LEVITY OF GRAVITY

BY JONATHAN GREENHAUSE

One day, the earth will begin to lose its gravity,
 & little by little,
 light objects will float upwards,
 napkins & packets of sugar & salt & traffic tickets
 & haikus & sonnets,

but then things will grow more serious,
 small dogs
 fetching their balls as they ascend,
 followed by rats & stray cats & lawn chairs
 & all Autumn's leaves.

People will argue about what should be done,
 but it'll be too late,
 babies soaring from their carriages
 & unchained bicycles riding off into the sky
 with the occasional cow.

We'll try to save our lessened gravity,
 locking it down,
 but terrestrial buildings will come undone
 with nails & planks & corrugated tin & plaster
 & aluminum siding,

everything rising to the clouds & beyond,
 & despite our optimism
 hoping our fragile existences will continue,
 the air we breathe soon becomes
 a distant atmosphere.

FIVE LOSSES

BY BEN MERRIMAN

Dead Louise – Foretaste – Barb – Social Experiment – Riding With Death

Louise has killed herself for some reason. I do not know the reason because it has now been many years since I was with her, she went off to Yale, though until she went off to Yale I saw her so often and in such a light that she was my sister. I do not know the reason but there is never a lack of workable reasons, never a lack of tools, a young woman of talent would have known many such tools though I do not know which tool was used here, in this particular case (Louise), or whether the given tool was wielded with firmness or whether the tool was fondled at length, as a comfort. Many others will naturally question this act and its reasons and its particulars, and when a talented blonde woman goes to college in New England and then somewhat later kills herself of course certain echoes are to be heard, but I have no questions, I do not know but I have no questions, for my sister you were always judicious in your assessment of things and I will simply allow it to be supposed that you were in the right.

On a recent evening I walked toward the exit of a so-called queer bar, not in a state of especial intoxication or sobriety. A woman near the door called me by name and greeted me warmly, and when I had stopped and turned around she gave me a hug. I did not recognize the woman—not only did I not know her name, but I did not find in her face the face of anyone I could recall having met, or even seen, before. Making every attempt to extricate myself without rudeness, though surely making myself guilty, at least, of being brusque, I left, wondering if my quick departure from this particular bar might suggest, falsely, shame at having “been seen” leaving this sort of bar. Both the risk of having my motives misunderstood, and the fact that I, evidently, merit a warm greeting from a person virtually unknown to me, left me quite unsettled, and in the following days I could not help mentioning the incident to certain of my friends in whom I may in full confidence divulge those petty happenings of life that, in their aggregate, make an entire person. As I told certain of my friends of this event, after all a trivial one, I emphasized, again and again, that the event had seemed to be a foretaste of something terribly important, though I could not remember what.

* * *

My roommate, a dancer, was dropped on her knee, and none could say if she would be possessed of her same grace after completing the requisite course of rehabilitation. All day she limped around our apartment like a hobbled greyhound, and then at night, after taking great heaping palms of her pain medication, she would dance until her leg folded under her. She wept.

Her doctor then prescribed barbiturates, which did little for physical pain, but induced an ethical blackout that occluded her need to practice. I wondered at her calm.

At length she invited me to take barbiturates with her, and I accepted, as my own art was lately as ragged as hers. For some time after I took the pills I could only venture that everything seemed very *thick*. Then my voice said that, perhaps, I simply lacked any accomplishment as a writer.

No no, my roommate said, the problem is that you don’t feel yourself as you write, you don’t feel yourself. She brought a grapefruit knife from the kitchen and, taking my hands, began to slice open my fingertips. She sliced to some occult pace and measure, first left hand then right, thumb and pinkie and ring, and concluded with an arpeggio, adding a second cut to each finger. I did not clean my hands. We sat together watching my blood turn black and thought thickly.

* * *

Having a far-flung set of friends and acquaintances, I have often been obliged to introduce two persons well known to me but unknown to each other. After many such meetings, I took it in mind to introduce people not only by their names, but also with my own pithy assessment of

their defining qualities. Though I formulated a pithy assessment only after carefully considering the individual in question, I found that I invariably introduced people as “This is such-and-such person, who is intelligent and deeply wounded by the world.” This phrase, “intelligent and deeply wounded by the world,” had unanticipated effects. Many of my friends and acquaintances were flattered that I detected such fineness and sensitivity in them, and my manner of introducing two people led these people, in certain cases, to believe that I was bringing together two kindred spirits. Many disastrous romances ensued. Gradually all of those embedded in my so-called social network came to learn that I offered the same introductory phrase for all others embedded in my social network, and flattery gave over to a sense that I had played some cruel prank. And so I reverted to introducing people only by their names, taking it as given that possession of a name also implied a certain intelligence and sense of cosmic injury, but in taking this as given I began to think of Heidegger, and thinking of Heidegger I thought that all of the persons in my social network must be terribly boring if their essences could be adequately described in Heideggerian terms, and thinking of this I stopped communicating with all of the people in my social network, though not without a dull sense that I was somehow responsible.

* * *

Death and I were at ground in an unending golden plain. The two of us were joined by a single bridle, a cruel bit in each of our mouths. We thrashed our heads about, trying to learn which of us was riding the other. My teeth were pulverized down to bloody nothing.

All the while the grasses nodded their heads and chuckled, for a great storm was flying toward us with soundless flash. The wind issued out from it and then, as it came near, drew the air back into itself and scoured the plain away to void. One rider riding another, we galloped out to meet it.

THE PLAYGROUND CLOSES AT DUSK

BY CASSANDRA SELTMAN

I drive my grandmother's beige Camry, which I call the mystery machine. It smells like Czech cigarettes and antiseptics, eager pine air conditioners, and a stagnancy that comes before birth. The sound of the horn is like none other on the road, not an angry honk but a knell that travels through the traffic as a lithe prophet. The sound is anachronistic, it comes from an old town with a stone chapel and a well that will become infected with an invisible sickness. On a highway where Cadillacs collide with Subarus and streetlights mimic children's games, I'm the only one who can hear the sound.

I push through the traffic, reaching toward gum-stained sidewalks and bodegas, boots behind windows, and political graffiti on wind-cracked walls. Each caned man on a park bench looks different now. For months and years they were the same men, tweed caps and crinkled faces, weathered smiles that only now, in these new moments, have turned sinister, clothes ragged not worn, smiles lustful not pensive. The break lights of the car in front blink on and I slow down, lurch forward. I touch my navel, embracing the slightly swollen skin beneath white cotton. When she can walk, will the men on the park benches coo to her? Will she buy those boots behind glass windows, or eat cherries from that fruit seller on the street?

They say it's too early to tell about the sex, but I know. I see her fully formed, a tiny homunculus that's taken up residence inside my stomach. I know what she'll look like when she yawns, and I will rewrite history by that yawn, years of culture undone and formed anew in the opening and closing of her mouth. Because when something is that potent, it is an essence that takes you

to the essence of all other things at once. Most of all, she will be sad when the playground closes at dusk.

I'll want to teach her that thoughts are things, sure they might not sell them in stores next to Sudafed and tampons, but they exist all right. They're medicine or poison depending, and each day I spend hours seeing my homunculus growing in my mind. I took down my picture of the steel mill, for I don't want to think of industry, but in its place I put up a painting of a redwood forest with fairies in the trees. The brush strokes are licks, little waves paradoxically frozen in motion. I watch it so that she will want to run through the forest like a wood nymph.

I eat a lot of fresh strawberries, for it is the season for it, and maybe she'll have a strawberry birthmark on her thigh, or strawberry hair, which does run in the family, on my grandmother's side at least (bless her soul, who sleeps in Bethlehem). I hope she takes after my grandmother, with beautiful silk hair and a fine little nose. Women like me, with wild hair, seem always to be complicated, live in a double image, in the queasy liminal spaces of the day. We have to see our self twice all the time, are condemned to navigate through our own forest of oracles and signs. Wild women like me, at night, call to their oracles, spin the bottom of the human sculpture and ask, why is the ground so wavy? Then it is the cold floor of the house I feel on my back, seamlessly brushing, solid becomes water, faster, building speed I lift off the ground, and then I am given to my answer and I come back.

When my mother was pregnant, I dreamt I jumped on her stomach and my baby sister popped out. She was wearing clothes and everything. It was as clean as getting a gumball out of the gumball machine. I just hopped and hopped and soon she was this miniature person that walked around like Anderson's Thumbelina.

I try to explain to her everything I see, want to give her the truth and that only. As I drive the mystery machine I see the truth of each color, it's so bright it burns out to black. Two teenagers are walking on the street, one says to the other, "it went so fast, then it was like *slam*." I imagine him slapping his hands together. Slam, little Thumbelina. Is a street word. Goes on slam dunk and sports drinks and loud noises that go slam and not like salmon which has that green about the gills softness at the end of the word that feels just like raw fish in your mouth. Not sandman, which the wealthy tell their kids about in cozy stories, but *slam*. Your tongue bangs against the top of the teeth in a perfect mime as you say the word to yourself, or your couch, or your dad. *Slam*.

An orphaned bicycle lies on the sidewalk. I've passed this curb many times in the past week, and it's in the same position every time. It's invisible; no one bothers to steal it or move it, drunken kids won't even kick it or throw it around a little. The ground itself seems to reject its weight. I can't look at it any longer, and wish it would just disappear, but feel guilty for making that wish. Once the wish has been made, it can't be undone anymore. And across the street is *Jane's Exchange*. The little store succeeds in feeling familiar, even if you've never been there before. The store is a comfortable woman that wears stockings with overalls over them. A long time ago she let you stay up a little later than you should have. Her feet look graceful in those stockings, underwater creatures that swim through the air.

Little Thumbelina, make up rules for yourself as you go along. Never use a high voice when you want to make something seem frivolous. Never use a low voice when you are trying to be serious. Never use mock Spanish. Don't follow what feels right, for it will mislead you. Follow the underbelly of what feels right, the uncomfortable specter of the undesirable. People will think you're jejune, supine on the grass in the summer sun. They will wish they could lie that way, and that will make them all the more bellicose. They'll put on their armor in front of the mirror, while dreams of self-congratulation slip into feverish nightmares of self-slaughter, but dear, will you play in front of the mirror? Dancing for the self over your shoulder, the split self that watches when you chance it, when you think you are absentminded, when you join in other's winsome pleasures.

A bus passes on my right. One day Thumbelina will fall asleep and when she wakes she will be on the back of that bus. It will be night out, and the back of the seat in front of her will be blue with jagged lines. She will not see the bus driver. The other people on the bus will be calm, sedated. They won't talk or look at each other. One woman in front of her will wear a flashy leopard print shirt, a rhinestone-d handbag will hang by her side. She'll look tired. She won't live up to the loudness of her attire, her mouth will be turned down, as if she must wear these clothes, she is sentenced to them. The man next to her will shake his leg nervously.

With night will come a certain amount of complacency. She won't question where she's going or when she'll get there, or why she's on this bus. As she wakes again, she'll become a little scared of the other people on the bus. Not their potential to harm, rather their potential not to. So much unsaid, enough, and if her eyes ever meet another's, the other's will seem to say, "we can pretend."

There will be a movie screen towards the front of the bus. Blue, that plays nothing, but the passengers will stare towards it anyway, as insects to a light. She'll look out the window and rest the soft of her cheek on her knuckles. She'll fall back asleep. Images will bump against each other, swell and shrink, leave behind outlines and hues. Now she'll be in the front of a car, and realize how similar it is to be driving a car and to be in the back of the car—kind of the same. She'll feel as if her car is in the back of some larger car.

She won't remember when she left, and she won't know when she'll arrive, but she will feel it coming. She'll sometimes wonder if she could stop the car, if maybe she didn't have to move inevitably toward her destination. But she'll be too tired to try. She'll wish with a slippery pain for her car to break down. That she would be delayed, or crash, or the worst would just happen already.

I don't wish my car would break down, though. Not now. I want to keep on, past the familiar streets to a place I know less well, each tree becomes a wagging finger, go back. I know now how my stomach became swollen. It was not a miracle of God, just the trickery of man as it has always been. Thumbelina owes her life to a simple household object, found in a mother's sewing kit, or bodice of a newly sewed dress—a pin with a pearl ball on the tip. And from so small an item will spring a whole being, a grown child with indignant strawberry curls.

But the ungrateful girl won't worship this pin in return, will have no shrine to it in her bedroom, no sanctified box from which she'll pull it out. In fact, she'll know nothing of this pin, and the sinister role it played in her conception, landing somewhere between deviant and criminal, juvenile trickster and master con artist.

Thumbelina's father was merely the assistant to the pin's plan, the releaser of its true conspirator nature. A rare August wind blew a cloud right into his head that day, obscuring his refined judging abilities. I lay in the other room, each breath taken labored by both the humid air and the growing desire for the man, who at this moment was fiddling casually with my fate.

Thumbelina, your father, foot outstretched, nudged the bathroom door, the viewing sliver through which I might possibly see became even slimmer, my chances of witnessing this event decreasing in proportion to the openness of the entrance. He leaned over the bathroom sink, Trojan in one hand pressed against the white ceramic, the other hand making its way through his sweaty curls. I would leave him; I would definitely leave him. He peered through the crack to reveal my long hair across the quilt. Maybe he thought, I was history and future in one person, I owned his lust and his pleasure; his wisdom, his memories, all belonged to me. Or maybe he was thinking of nothing at all.

His eyes scanned the bathroom for nearby pointed objects, and next to some scrub he saw the now infamous pearl pin. One decision and no return, he reached out his arm and neurons fired, sensory to inter to motor, over and over, light fixtures cracked and sparkled in his brain as he pierced it in one clean stab. He opened the door to the other room, bursting to unwrap, hold, release, the person beneath him.

Indulge me, darling, in that little regression. I have no more memories and no more quarrels, just a panoply of pictures to show you. Pictures given to me by my fleshy hominid, that daily calls to me like a siren, a seductress whose shores I wake up washed upon. You see that building up ahead? It used to be a Discothèque. One winter I saw it on fire. All the fireman rushed and sprayed their water on it and whatever other extinguishing chemicals they use. It was so cold, the water froze on the outside of the building. It was amazing to look at—a building covered in ice, with flames in every window.

It's next to a church, with God's eyes in the windows. The ice disco is next to the God's eyes is next to a teenage hang out spot, with a few benches and a few trees. Feral boys and girls slap hands, burn spoons, and spill over. They don't know that community carnival is lost, over, but they mourn it anyway. They try to resuscitate it, breath life back into that elusive feeling, or rather, conjure it. Set out the bait and hope it will come. Is it really dead, or has it just moved on to somewhere else? "Somewhere else" gets to *enjoy*, live in joy, gets to see everything sparkle. Little Thumbelina, all they want is for things to wiggle and dance for them. Then they want to aim and shoot 'em up.

My homunculus shifts, and when I see it clearly, it's so intoxicating that it makes everything else alien. For a while it becomes the normal and the dashboard, my own hands, the streets, be-

come the other I cannot perceive. You are of a different breed than I am. I am one of those that sleep a lot and never go to the doctors and seek out a quotidian amount of pleasure in all endeavors. You will have reason; I see already how mathematical your mind is. You will observe and organize, until the world bends under your own mythology, your chronology, and your structure.

There are many churches in this neighborhood, Polish and Catholic, with green roofs that were once gold. This particular one says, “Let The Lord Under Your Roof.” They mean, under the roof of your mouth, for that is where God comes in, but not everybody knows that. If your mouth has a roof then your head is a little upside down house. Sometimes you will feel you are stuck in leisure in that house, and that is when you’ll turn to God. You will feel you are standing on the top of a hill and words are pebbles that roll away from you. But that is when you know you have to turn to God. God is just the ability to reimagine.

I keep driving—pushing through the alphabet till the words become Spanish and the air becomes spicier. Two men rap on the sidewalk, speaking in the dark lord’s jargon, poetry. No words, like no journey, ever only look forward. They are all Janus-faced, with one face looking back. The sun has made its daily journey across the sky and hides behind the City College pool. A few stragglers are left in the afterglow of summer heat, jumping, thrusting their bodies eagerly into the water. Only one voice can be heard, an authoritative voice, yelling, “No running!”

ANOBIUM V3

INTER

LECTION





















ANOBIUM V3

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RELATION

RACE THE NICKEL IN YOUR SHOE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN M. BENNETT, POET
CONDUCTED BY BENJAMIN VAN LOON

A typical poem from writer John Bennett (b. 1942) reads something like the frenzied cant of a sleeper caught in a midnight anxiety dream. Delicate moments of clarity are interlaced in convoluted webs of prose that have been drawn-and-quartered with horses hopped up on psychotropics and gentle lashings. His poetry is of a mutant strain: hebephrenic, disorienting, and upsetting only on occasion.

His poetry is something more of a wolf in wolves' clothing. It lacks the pedantic wink of more mainstream poetry and harbors a thousand-pound, psychosomatic punch. It has a cryptic energy, encoding a universe where language has failed but symbols remain. It's difficult, but not obtuse.

Bennett rarely offers insight into his poems as such, but as he writes in the postscript to *Mailer Leaves Ham* (1999, Pantograph Press), "I've never been interested in poetry as such." Rather, Bennett has always seen poetry "as a means to an end, the means most suited to me, to my bent, a means to obtain a total knowledge, or enlightenment maybe."

This is not *l'art pour l'art*, but *l'art pour l'illumination*. In this sense, his poems are more like polyphilosophical proverbs or lessons in the art of consciousness-expansion. Alternately, one could say his poetry is more like an experimental contrivance or ironic concoction cooked up from a cut-and-paste homage to Burroughs. Two sides of the same coin.

I first learned about John Bennett through Blaster "Al" Ackerman. I had recently been turned on to Ackerman and subsequently set out to acquire all available Ackerman ephemera.

I noticed he had written an introduction to *Instruction Book* (2006, Luna Bisonte) by John Bennett. It's a strange little book with a glossy white cover and non-existent cover copy. Ackerman's introduction is a two-page non-sequitur about toilet seats, watermelons, poison, and flowerbeds. It seems hardly telling at first, but as you work into the meat of Bennett's poems, Ackerman's non-sequitur makes all other preferred introductions seem inappropriate, and quite possibly insolent. For example, Bennett's "When to Renroc" from *Instruction Book* reads:

Dried rabbits or a retsulc laffo beef
 mister or a dub gnhguoc glued
 mudflag or a elib reddon shorne
 burger or a deknud kcaskcur vast
 sugar or a teeb reddalb flange
 struggle or a elttod hciwdnas pig
 fog or a depmuls esactius

We seek to decode (retsulc, cutlers, cluster, relucts...), or to establish a pattern between the legible and the illegible. We try to uncover a reason for these various juxtapositions, but the poems are always inevitably resistant to the analytical devices pulled from our stockpiled criticisms and rhetorical inventories. With enough repetition, and enough frustration, we realize that something else is happening here; these aren't just words on a page. They're pictures, extrapolations, primordial articulations. They don't take themselves so seriously as to be submitted to textbook analyses.

Bennett has been one of the fortunate few who has managed to make a career, if not a legacy, informed by this same spirit of irreverence. Born in Chicago in 1942, Bennett spent the first few years of his life with his family and anthropologist father in Japan, later returning to life in the American Midwest. He has a PhD in Latin American Literature, conferred by UCLA in 1970. He is the main curator of the Avant Writing Collection, the William S. Burroughs Collection, and the Cervantes Collection at the Ohio State University library.

In 1974, he founded Luna Bisonte Prods which continues to release new books into 2012. From 1975 to 2005, via Luna Bisonte, he edited and published the *Lost & Found Times*, a magazine of word art, mail art, and avant writing. Bennett himself has been published in over 300 books, chapbooks, and other media. He has collaborated with many different writers and artists, including Blaster "Al" Ackerman, Ivan Arguelles, Scott Helmes, Tom Cassidy, Jim Leftwich, and many others. Though he is officially retired, Bennett continues to write, publish, and collaborate for no other reason than love of the game. He currently lives in Columbus, Ohio.

When I got in touch with Bennett to set up an interview, he mentioned that he would be in Chicago to participate in Fluxfest (February 9 – 12, 2012), which is a gathering of Fluxus artists and performers for various experimental arts events around the city, some of which are scheduled, many of which are impromptu. Bennett is a frequent participant/performer in Fluxus

events, either as a solo poet or as a member of the Be Blank Consort, an experimental poetry-reading collective. John Bennett's wife, Catherine Mehrl Bennett, is also very involved in the Fluxus scene.

On the morning of February 10, I took the L to Belmont Avenue, where I would be meeting Bennett in front of the City Suites Hotel, where he was staying for the weekend. It was a frigid, colorless morning, with a light snow falling intermittently. Bennett was wearing an outfit seemingly pulled from the racks at the Salvation Army: jeans, ill-fitted baseball cap, and a faded green flannel shirt. He carried an old day traveler packed with various books and TLPs (Tacky Little Pamphlets), which he would be bringing with him to the Fluxfest activities later that day.

We walked across the street from the hotel to Clark's (a diner), ordered some coffee, and spent the next hour talking about Fluxfest, poetry, and the limits of language. What follows is an edited transcription of our conversation, a few selections of Bennett's visual poetry.

ANOBIUM: *So you're here in Chicago for Fluxfest. What's your involvement with it?*

JOHN BENNETT: This current movement of Fluxus-type activities has been going on less than ten years. Fluxus was happening in the 60's, and most of those people are gone now. But people still perform some of the scores from that time. That's the central idea. Dadaist conception of things. It's just very open. You can do whatever you damn well want to, and I enjoy that, with all of this different sort of activity going on. Visual, oral, performative, whatever. I'm basically a writer, but my writing has functioned in all kind of non-literary environments, using non-literary methods and techniques. It's perfect for what I'm interested in. And my wife, Cathy, has also been very interested in this world. She is trained as an artist, so it's perfect for her and she really gets into it.

Your poetry definitely falls in line with this Fluxus-way of doing things. You sort of describe your approach to poetry in the back of your book, Mailer Leaves Ham...

Well, my poetry is different from mainstream English-language poetry these days. I'm not trying to tell people what to do, which is basically what American poetry does. I'm not trying to write poetry as much as I am interested in the way language is—for me—the best medium to understand myself and myself in the world. It just happens that language is the material with which I can best do that. It's maybe a matter of genetics, I suppose.

A poem I write doesn't have a 'message,' unless you want to find one, and then you can find any message you please. It's a kind of mirror with which you can see yourself. I forget what I said in that *Mailer Leaves Ham* blurb.

It basically says the same thing.

Alright, well I guess I'm sticking to the same story then. [Laughs]

How is someone supposed to read your poetry? Is it something that should be experienced, rather than read?

Well, one way to do it is to read it to yourself, read it out loud, or however you would approach a text. Pay attention to what is happening to your emotions and your mind, and pay attention to your reaction—whatever it is. Then, if you want to come up with something to say about it, or some way of understanding it, pay attention to those responses. It's not like interpreting literature, like in a university. Some people have attempted to decipher these texts using traditional critical apparatus and it's interesting to see what they come up with, though it always seems very awkward to me.

Like forced or contrived?

Yeah, because these poems need a different approach than that. Anytime you have a radically different kind of writing, or art, or whatever, the criticism has to change. If you want to be a critic, you have to deal with this new reality. You can't deal with it the old way. When I read these things myself, I have a different response every time. When I perform them, I perform them differently every time. People ask me, "What does this poem mean?" And I will not respond to those questions, because if I do, it will kill the thing. I don't have any say in the matter.

It's like those poetry readings where the reader spends five minutes explaining the poem, and then they read it.

It's awful when they do that. I hate it.

If I can allow myself to talk a little about how I react to your poems, it seems that your poetry goes beyond this limited field we call 'knowledge.'

Well, that would be your reaction to these texts, and that's what you should pay attention to. One thing people often try to do with my work is ask, is this visual poetry? is this sound poetry? The truth is, it's all of that: text, visual, sound. In a way, all poetry is visual. A traditional poem has a blank space at the end of the line, and when you see that, it's a visual experience. When you're reading it out loud, you translate that visual thing into an oral thing. All of those things are equally important. So if you look at one of my poems, the viscosity of it is something you

would incorporate—or I would incorporate—into a performance, as if it were a musical score *in addition to* being a text, *in addition to* a graphic design.

When did you get started as a writer?

My mother always told this story of how—and I sort of remember this—I was very small, and I would repeat words. It would be a new word I learned or a word I found interesting. I would repeat it over and over and drive them nuts, and I still do that now: one of the performance stunts I do is based around that idea.

When I was about 5, we took a boat to Japan. My father was an anthropologist, and we went there during the occupation. He was doing some research at the time. I wrote little notes and made little drawings and wrapped them up, put them in little boxes and bottles, taped them up, and threw them overboard into the sea. I’m still doing it.

Did you spend a lot of your youth in Japan?

We lived there for about two-and-a-half years, and then we came back to the States. I had my first experience of culture shock when I returned, which seemed strange, because of how young I was. America just seemed like a very strange place. And it still does.

I live in Columbus, Ohio now. I’ve lived there for a long time. I’ve also lived in Mexico, St. Louis... but I was born in Chicago, actually. Last night, we were doing something down at the Art Institute at the Artist Books Library, and we walked past the Palmer House. My father was from Milwaukee and he went to the University of Chicago. When we were very young, we could come to Chicago to visit relatives, and we would stay at the Palmer House.

Regarding your current writing: you’ve done a lot of work with “Blaster” Al Ackerman, and you’re also connected with this larger group of ‘outsider’ writers.

Some of us learned about each other through the phenomenon of mail art back in the ‘70s. That’s how I met Ackerman, and since that time, we’ve done a lot of collaboration together. In fact [*pointing to the materials he gave me*], there’s a TLP [*Tacky Little Pamphlet*] in your stack there. Ackerman hacks, done very recently. What he does is use various lunatic techniques to combine texts. I write a lot of them, but he uses other stuff, too.

Would you say you and this group of writers is intentionally ‘outside?’

Well, it’s the reality. The establishment of writing culture is not interested in what we do. If any-

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thing, it feels threatened. I'm curator of the Avant Writing Collection in the Rare Books Library at Ohio State University, and over the years, we've had a number of events around this subculture, and the collection is more or less 'world famous.' But the English department at OSU stays completely away from it. We invited them, saying they should at least show their students, but the faculty won't do any of this. They won't show up, they won't respond to e-mail.

Why do you think that is?

I think they feel threatened. What they're doing is institutional and is basically teaching kinds of rhetoric so people can get jobs teaching the same rhetoric. They see this world where people are actually writing stuff.

It seems more authentic.

My degree and my academic career were focused on Latin American literature and their avant-garde has a different place in the culture at large. They take it more seriously to the extent that they've thrown people in jail for it. Artists have had to spend time in prison, or have been forced to emigrate or be exiled. Poetry is taken seriously in those countries. Even the way out stuff. That appealed to me, in addition to the literature itself. It seemed much more alive and connected to the world and more responsive to the world than anything around here. I'm still a part of that world, and I also write in Spanish quite a bit.

I actually like the idea of the Avant Writing Collection being ignored by the English Department.

Yeah, there are some advantages to it. You don't have to get sucked into that world at all. Ackerman used to say—I think he was quoting Phillip K. Dick—that the best thing for a writer is to write in a despised medium. [Laughs]

So what is the story behind the Avant Writing Collection?

I used to be a professor in the Spanish department, but then I started working in the Latin American Studies Library, and I was also working with a huge William Burroughs collection. It would take decades to catalog the whole thing. I kept finding my own work in his papers, as well as the work of other people from this 'outsider' group, and it occurred to me that nobody was collecting the work of this subculture. I regarded it as important. That's why I published the *Lost & Found Times* for thirty years. Nobody else was publishing that stuff.

So I proposed the development of a new collection, a sort of 'next generation' idea. to the

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head of Rare Books, and this was about 1998. We have thousands of books and serials which we've managed to collect; large collections of people's papers and manuscripts; correspondence; mail art; photographs. These people all work with various media, so the collection is enormous because nobody else is doing it, and I was able to build it mostly through people donating those materials.

What is your role in the Avant Writing Collection?

I'm the curator of the collection. I developed it, got all the donations, and got funding for endowment to provide regular funds for the collection. I did some of the cataloging, processing the large collections of manuscripts, and supervised student workers to do that kind of stuff. I'm now officially retired, but things aren't very well off in the library world these days and they haven't been able to hire a replacement, so I go in every week and keep things going as a volunteer. Eventually they'll have to hire somebody because people are starting to come in, consult the collection, and they need somebody who knows what it is.

Do you see a lot of people interested in continuing that avant tradition?

Yeah, sure. There are a lot of folks about your age who are starting to do stuff. They're very interested in it. It's a little different in how they go about it, and different in what they do. It's more electronic and whatnot. And here YOU are [*Laughs*], interested in it.

In this subculture, nobody really makes a living doing it. I'm probably the closest person making a living from it that there is. I mean, there are people who are bums, architects, people who have professional careers of various sorts, people who work in an office. There's a guy who works in a parking garage. You name it, there are people doing it.

I saw a short comic strip recently. It went something like, "When I was young, I was an idealist and I saw all of this possibility in the world; as I aged, I saw the world as being harsh and unforgiving and I became a realist; but now that I'm older, I'm a surrealist, and things are pretty weird." Is this avant/surrealist tendency a natural progression, or is it more connected to our era?

Well, one way of discussing that question is to talk about it in terms of what reality is. We have a world we've constructed, where you go to your job and so forth, and people normally think of that as the real world. That's just the scum on the surface. There is this other world, and one of the things I do with language, for example, is try to get to the rest of the universe that this scum is just on the surface of.

That takes a lot of practice, because you have to see through the scum. And you can do that through media like language, visual art, sound, music or whatever. With language, I tend to believe that all words are connected. You say one word, like ‘word,’ and it’s connected to every other word in every other language that ever existed. If you use various techniques to get part of those other connections, you’re getting more of the universe, or more of the world, and you’re seeing more of it through these devices. That’s sort of a surrealist idea. I say that’s kind of what I’m doing.

One of the techniques, for example: I have a text or a phrase in my mind, and instead of writing that down, I write down words that sound like those words. And that creates a very different text, but it’s one of the kinds of texts that is underneath this surface of the everyday language that we use.

Is there is a world outside of language, or is language something that prevents us from experiencing everything?

Well, we can’t experience everything, except for occasional very brief moments of ecstasy or what-have-you. Maybe that’s an illusion. But we can start to peek beyond the surface of language, or the surface of what we see. We can get little peeks into that other world, that greater world, and that goes back to what I was talking about. A poem as a mirror. Though perhaps it’s less like a mirror and more like a transparent pool. You’re looking down and seeing the bottom and what you’re seeing on the bottom of the water - the rocks and everything - is in your own head.

What would you suggest to someone ‘new’ to this world? How can they develop it?

Just practice. Try writing without editing while you’re writing. Most people don’t do this. They think, “What can I say? I can’t think of what to say.” Just ignore that. Write down whatever writes itself down. You can go back to it later and mess around with it. It doesn’t matter. My experience is, every time I sit down and write a poem, it seems dopey to me at first. You just ignore that and write it anyway. It doesn’t matter. It’s just words. It’s just a poem. Who the hell cares? As I say, you can mess with it later. But when you do that, you can surprise yourself and see something eventually you would not have expected.

I was trained as a poetry therapist, and several years ago, I used this technique at a mental hospital in Columbus. What this therapy involves, basically, is getting people to write this way; to write something they would not have expected. You tell them, “Write a poem,” and the first thing they write is “Roses are red, violets are blue...” and they get that out of their system, and then you give them a trick: write a poem about yourself as if you were a house - things like that.

Then they come up with this stuff and say, “Wow, I never knew I thought that.” You can write and read the text from that point of view, and go from there. Just keep doing it.

How was it doing that at a mental hospital?

I loved it. I met some very interesting people and I saw some very interesting writing that came out of that. Some people think, “Well, you’re a poetry therapist, so you get them to write a poem and then you interpret it for them.” It’s not that at all. Don’t do that. As soon as you do that, the patients clam up, because they think you’re part of the establishment there; you’re one of the shrinks, trying to get at them.

How did you get into doing this therapy?

There is a big National Poetry Therapy Association, and I had a friend who was involved with that, so I did some training and did some teaching. I trained other people to do it, and I did it myself for almost ten years. It’s kind of like art therapy.

Did it seem like people responded to it well?


Some did, yeah. I would have people who came and, from what I heard from other staff people, these were people who wouldn’t talk to anybody. They started coming every time to poetry group and they would write stuff and they were very eager about it.

What are some other jobs you’ve had?

I was a professor, a librarian, a curator, I worked in an all-night diner at a motel outside St. Louis while I was in college, I worked in a rare book library while I was in grad school. I had those kind of jobs. On the whole, I’ve been fairly fortunate in having work that was interesting to me. I’m not just interested in writing. I have these other interests, and you kind of need to have that, I think.

You need to have a life to write from.

PHOTO OF JOHN M. BENNETT BY JEFF SASS (P102)
VISUAL POEMS BY JOHN M. BENNETT (P103, 105, 106, 110)

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# WRITERS ARE WORTHLESS

AN INTERVIEW WITH ADAM LEVIN  
CONDUCTED BY BENJAMIN VAN LOON

Saturday mornings are rough. That's probably why Adam Levin suggested we meet up at a coffee joint in Logan Square, on Chicago's northwest side. There's no science to back it, but coffee always does *something* for a hangover.

Adam Levin is a Chicago-born writer, though he rejects most of what this might suggest. He dresses in jeans, a t-shirt, and a black hoodie—generic dude-wear. He has a giddy, recursive way of speaking, and the rhythm of his words suggests that self-deprecation is something that runs in his blood. Its persistence (insistence?) is disarming at first—as if he's using it to abdicate pretense—but it's a contagious energy; somehow familiar.

I first met Levin a few weeks prior to our interview at a reading for his newest book, *Hot Pink* (McSweeney's, 2012), a razor-sharp short story collection. This was a follow-up to his (literally) massive 2010 hit, *The Instructions*, a thousand-page novel that is one part David Foster Wallace, one part Phillip Roth, one part Talmud, and ten parts adolescent obsessive compulsion. That book won him the New York Public Library's Young Lions Award, which he could shelf next to his 2003 Summer Literary Seminars Fiction Contest award and 2004 Joyce Carol Oates Fiction Prize. He currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and lives in Ukrainian Village, though when we met in the midst of his *Hot Pink* tour, he was just about to get back on the road to head west for a few weeks. I was fortunate enough that our Saturday mornings lined up accordingly.

While this interview wasn't originally scheduled to be included in this volume, the tenor and

content of our conversation struck an electric nerve. We spent a lot of time talking about MFA programs and, by extension, institutional education in general: its importance in the world and its role in the arts, and how—at the end of proverbial day—nothing really matters save that you do what you love, even if what you love is stupid.

**ANOBIUM:** *[Adam Levin enters the café and we begin sharing conversation about alarm clocks, technology, and hangovers. I share an anecdote about how people who ‘disconnect’ find that their thinking becomes more lucid as a result.]*

**ADAM LEVIN:** That seems accurate. Relying on technology has the same effect as, say, not writing. There are days where I don’t get any work done in the morning and then it seems like my brain doesn’t work for the rest of the day. I just get spaced out, and it’s hard to know what the cause and effect is because your brain is already messy.

*[A barista approaches us with a plate of bacon, offering it to Levin, who seems to be acknowledged as a regular. At first, Levin declines, but the barista says the bacon is hormone-free. It is unclear if it is the barista’s insistence, or the lack of hormones in the meat, that prompts Levin to change his mind. I snag a piece for myself. It tastes the same as bacon with hormonal additives. Oh well. Levin complains that the bacon is cold, laughs.]*

*The barista, who may or may not have an established rapport with Levin, then asks him, “You know those children’s books, like, If You Give a Pig a Pancake?” Levin says no. The barista says, “Well, it’s like, never give a pig a pancake, because then he’ll want syrup, and then he’ll want this and that, and the story goes on.” He pauses, testing the waters, and then says, “There should be a book that is, like, Never Give an Angry Jew Bacon, Because Then He’ll Just Bitch About It.”*

*There is a brief, unsure moment, but then Levin laughs and says to me, “That’s yours, man. That’s Anobium’s next book.” The barista returns to his post, empty plate in hand. We sip our respective beverages and return, again, to INTERVIEW mode.]*

**Hot Pink, your new book of short stories, is quite a departure from The Instructions. Was this book more difficult? Less?**

All writing is hard. What you’re going for—in short or long stories—is a certain kind of economy. What makes short stories more fascinating to me, at times, is that they have the potential to be more affective than novels. There are many more perfect short stories than there are perfect novels. I don’t think it should be that way, but it is. There’s more room to fuck up in a novel. Or maybe writers get lazy. But in a short story, every single line is doing a hundred different things. There are novels that do that, but it happens more often in short stories. There’s nothing

you should need to excise in a short story, and the world it creates is much more complete and efficient. A novel is usually more complicated and requires more reading. Plus, I think the short story form is a lasting form, and as far as the literary arts go, it's one thing American writers do better than anyone.

***What were some highlights from your Hot Pink tour?***

It was a tiring trip, but really good. I was all over the place and had lots of big showings in some fun spots. In Philly, they have this 'Tire Fire' reading series. It's at a punk rock bar. There was a huge showing. It was with this guy, Daniel Torday, who is a killer writer. Then in New York, I read at a gig where I actually got paid, which was cool. It was at the powerHouse bookstore. Crazy bookstore. Four or five times the size of this coffee shop we're in and they don't have any shelves. Everything is on tables. They have this big staging area. And it's in DUMBO, which is beautiful. I think it's a little too pricey, but it's a really cool looking neighborhood. Like something out of *Batman*. Big warehouse spaces.

***With a tour, a publicist, two books out on McSweeney's, do you ever feel like you've 'arrived?'***

In some ways, I feel like whatever book I write next will get published, so in that sense, yes. But I don't feel like I've arrived at a *state* or something. I don't think having a publicist has changed much for me, aside from helping with touring and whatnot. I think I'm also in a position where, if one teaching position doesn't work out, I can get another one. My becoming a writer has felt like a very gradual 'becoming.'

***As a writer myself, I have this amorphous goal where I think that everything I do will come together in a unified whole at some point. Do you have an amorphous goal?***

I really like teaching, and I really like writing. Relatively speaking, teaching is really good for all of that. Obviously, if I didn't have anything to do but read and write, I would be able to get more done in that area. But if it is teaching versus doing something else, well, the first thing is that other jobs depress me. Secondly, teaching offers me a lot of time to sit down and work, so in that sense, it all comes together, but it's not like one day, I will write a novel about teaching. It's not anything like that.

***How is teaching at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago?***

SAIC was my first choice. The students there are awesome and the undergrads are great, too. Even first year students are motivated. It's not an easy program to get into, but after the first

year, there's something like a 70% dropout rate. All the kids who came to art school to smoke weed and get laid are pushed out, because the amount of stuff those first year kids have to do to get through is insane. You have to take five courses, and three or four of those are studios. The students are in those studios for 18-24 hours a week, which is way more time I spent in anything at college, even with my hard weeks, and then these students have to go home and make shit and write papers. The core programs are really hardcore, so if students can get through that, they're generally really dedicated students. Those are good students to work with, because if I do a good job at teaching them something, they will actually end up learning it. That's thrilling.

In the MFAW program, there is a lot of variety, because none of the students are on a particular academic track. They're just writers. If they are interested in doing some genre mixing, they can do that. Each student can take up to two graduate programs a semester, and they meet with a teacher one-on-one every other week, so there's a lot of faculty contact.

***If you take into consideration the whole of liberal arts history, MFA programs are a very young phenomena. Is it worth it to get an MFA?***

That's like asking if it's worth it to get a college degree. It depends on the college, and depends who you are. I'm happy I got my MFA at Syracuse. That was a killer situation a lot of people don't have the option to do. I went into this tiny program, I was paid, and I was working with one of my favorite writers. That kind of thing is great.

If a person wants to do an MFA program where they'll be for the next three or four years of their lives, I think it's totally worth it. But when you start talking about if it's worth it to go into debt to get an MFA, that's a person-to-person thing. Some people are cool with that. I'm not. The ideal circumstance is where you're working with writers whose work you admire and you're working with good peers. The best programs have good funding and excellent teachers, so with those programs, you'll have a huge applicant pool. A situation like that is across-the-board awesome, unless you're someone who just doesn't like people.

I'm someone who has always hung out with writers and artists, so I like people. But I think there's this thing that happens when you get into college and move into your early 20s. You stop making friends. You already have your friends, and that's that. But in my experience, when I got into the MFA program, the majority of my friends now are the ones I made in during that time. It's very a deep friendship. We look at each other's work, we hang out together. I can't understate the importance of making those friends and having people who you can trust with your work. That's a big deal. Before I went there, I had like one and a half of those people, and I felt like I was bothering them sometimes, but now it's like I have a crew.

*Because an MFA is such an institutional endeavor, it seems to have a stigma of being cloistered, or not very ‘world wise.’*

I’ve seen the opposite of that in my own experience. In these programs—generally—there is nobody saying, ‘you need to write about these things in this way.’ There was maybe a period in the 1980s where, for example, everyone read Carver and everyone taught Carver. I don’t know if that’s actually true, but that’s how it seemed, and that’s maybe where that idea comes from. I think people who haven’t gotten MFAs might propagate the idea. David Foster Wallace’s miserable time at Arizona might be the exception. Anytime you have an instructor who is aesthetically insecure, you can see trouble brewing.

When you say world wise—the thing is—most writing is shit. Most writers don’t have talent, and they write bad stuff, and that’s that. I really doubt that there is a higher ratio of un-world-wise writing on either side of an MFA program. The numbers might get a little skewed when you start looking at publishing and it seems like MFA writers have a leg up on other writers, with that little tick on their CV, but with that said - most writing is shit, regardless of where it comes from. There’s nothing that says someone needs an MFA to be a good writer, by any means, but I think that the right programs in the right situation, with the right people - assuming there are good teachers - the MFA student will become a better writer faster. That’s what those programs are good for.

There’s the stigma about MFAs. The 15 year-old part of me is like, “Fuck those guys.” But then the older I get, the dumber that seems.

*Either you can write or you can’t write. It doesn’t really matter who you are.*

Writing is art. With art, people feel like they’re more entitled to have an opinion about it. Not everyone understands the art, but everyone has something to say about it. So people dismiss writing easily.

Think of medical school. There are tons of medical schools. The majority of doctors I’ve dealt with are pieces of shit, and they’re not even that good at doctoring. They make fucking mistakes left and right. They’re bad doctors. Those motherfuckers have MDs, but their profession is revered? I don’t know why. But then you should ask do you need a medical degree to be a doctor? Of course you do. But having a medical degree doesn’t make you a good doctor. Nobody assumes that it makes you a good doctor. Same with lawyers or any kind of professional.

But then when you get into the liberal arts, it gets goofy. On the whole, there are a lot of MFAs in the country, and if they were all really well funded, and were shrunk down, and had good

teachers, there'd probably be a slightly higher proportion of good writers with MFAs.

It's really hard to be a writer. It takes a lot of time, it takes a lot of work, and if you can do something to give yourself time to become better at writing (such as entering an MFA program)—that's what you need to do. If you don't, and you say, 'That's part of a system and I don't want to be part of that'—you're crippling your own potential.

***It's never a good idea to make a decision based on principle.***

I agree. That's what it is to be a writer. It's to debunk any kind of hard-line stance on *anything*. There are exceptions to everything. Being an artist is never easy, but being a writer particularly—even being a successful writer—is especially difficult. It doesn't pay that well, which is why a lot of writers are teachers, among other things.

***Are there things you give up, as a writer?***

Most definitely. I know I'll never have kids. But then, at the same time, you're talking to someone who just got out of a long relationship. I'm all for ditching something that gets in the way of writing.

I don't mean to romanticize writing too much, because writing is a stupid thing to do. In practical terms, the decision to be a writer is ridiculous. It's fucked up. You can't do it for practical reasons. So if you're writing, you're a little crazy, or you're just incapable of existing without doing it. I think if someone has no desire to be a writer, they should just fucking quit. You can half-ass it, but I don't see the point. Not only does the world not give a shit if you write or not, but the world doesn't want you to write. You're not of use. The way society understands itself, it doesn't need writers. You're not going to get any external reward unless you get lucky, so you gotta do it because you love it.

In America, there is also this sense that you can make money writing. It's rare and unlikely, but people think they have a shot at it. There are, in fact, a lot of writers who aren't from independently wealthy backgrounds, but they're able to cobble together a career through writing.

***What are your thoughts on context?***

I love Chicago and I've lived here my whole life. But at the same time, I get wary of tendencies towards 'Chicago pride.' It freaks me out a little bit. It's a weird, second-city bullshit mentality bullshit. There are great writers in this city, but they are great writers because they are

great writers of the English language.

When things get really Chicago-centric—and I don't mean with subject matter—I mean when people organize around Chicagoness—it seems like an inferiority complex. We're a major city. It's a great place. I meet people from Chicago, for example, who say, 'Fuck New York City.' And I'm like, you're fucking shitting me! New York is amazing, but it doesn't mean that Chicago can't also be great. They're just different.

The fiction I love, even if it is set in a certain 'place,' is always going to have a certain universality to it. It doesn't make a lot of sense for me to undermine that by instituting a Chicago-centrism in the writing. On the other hand, a city is important because it's good for writers in Chicago to know each other. It's good to have that community. If Chicago gets props for turning out some good writers lately, that's great. It's good for everyone here. But when people start talking about a Chicago 'sound' or movement, I feel like it's bullshit, because writing—or writing fiction—is something you do alone in your room, trying to be better than everyone. If you're not doing that, you're full of shit.

***Do you think the place you're from affects your creative disposition, at least? That is to say: is there a certain style of view proprietary to Chicago? A point of view better understood as a Chicagoan?***

You can say that about any place, though I do think that my own writing is informed by regionalism. Let's take what I'm wearing as an example [jeans, black sneakers, black hoodie, t-shirt]: it's a ridiculous uniform, but this is how I fucking dress. I've worn this shit since I was fucking 14, but that's because everyone in this 'scene' or world—musician, artist, writer—dresses like this. I can show up to places dressed like this and that's pretty much the uniform. It's a certain kind of schlubiness.

But there is the idea that if you dress like this—and this is where the Chicagocentrism might come it – this 'outfit' has something to do with Chicago's working-class identity. But this is an inflated, inaccurate idea, though this idea signifies toughness, rather than something more privy. I grew feeling like I had to signify this tough guy shit. That seems like a Chicagoish thing, more than in other cities, and I think that affects the way we talk and think... but writing fiction is not writing sociology. I'm never sitting down and thinking, 'This character is in Chicago, how would he behave?' If I have a character, I ask, will he make the story better? If he's from Chicago, he's from Chicago. It's one thing to have someone be from somewhere, and certainly he might act a certain way if he as from such-and-such a place, but there's a degree to which his behavior is altered and a degree to which it matters.



*The Instructions seems like a very Chicagoish book. It does have a little city-limits vs. wealthy north-shore suburb sociology mixed in, as well—a nuance whose import might be best understood by a Chicagoan.*

That might be the case. Like I said, I'm aiming for universality, but let's think of the Jewish question people have asked about the book: would a non-Jew read *The Instructions*? I certainly wrote it hoping that the answer would be yes, but I didn't just have non-Jews in mind—I also was thinking of someone who might simply be unfamiliar with Torah and Talmud. I'm always writing with this thought of the outside text. I don't want to be the guy who makes you go to the outside text to understand this thing I'm referencing. I worked really hard to find ways to get things across—like the regionalism—without being too expository. Even with the pop-culture things I mention—like Larry David, Seinfeld, or Sacha Baron Cohen—I'm a little more forgiving. In fifty years, someone might not know who these people are, but the way this-or-that sentence is written, people should be able to understand that these people were comedians. Understanding the 'import' isn't necessary for understanding the story. I think that any kind of dynamic – say, of north shore vs. Chicago, which comes up in the book—these regional comments might be more apparent to Chicago readers, but they're not elements you need to understand the story. They'll enhance your knowledge.

With the scriptural stuff, I tried really hard to get those passages in the book to tell the stories *while* I was commenting on them. Like when I talk about the story in the Talmud where Adam gives seven years of his life to David. You don't need to know everything about that Talmudic passage—but if you do know it, your knowledge will be more enhanced. But *not* knowing these things—like if you're reading *Humboldt's Gift* by Saul Bellow and you can't recognize a street name—hopefully this 'lack of knowledge' will not interfere with how you're reading the story. I am definitely not writing to make people look shit up.

*When I was reading The Instructions, people would ask me what I was reading. I would say it's about a Jewish boy from the Chicago burbs who might or might not be the Jewish messiah. But I sometimes joked that I was reading scripture. Not only is it big, but it asks a lot of serious questions.*

I'm not religious, even though there are a lot of religious questions in the book. Part of writing *The Instructions* was just a way to get that shit out of my head. I think one of the central issues of the book is this: the people who think that there is a messiah who will literally come to earth—is this something people actually want? That's the center-most issue. The second issue, or question, is: how would this messiah manifest himself?

I think the way religion is understood in conversation among Americans who don't know shit

about religion, or read the scriptures, is that there is this ideal world with this nice, gentle God. For Christians, they think that this nice God had such a nice son; a sweet, loving guy. And while Jews might not always say that God is nice, they'll generally say that he's always just in a way we can understand. So the thinking goes that the messiah, who is supposed to be our salvation, will bring about a nice, pretty salvation in this soft context. That seems completely untenable. There is some violent shit in the Tanakh. If and when the messiah comes, there is going to be some mad bloodshed. It's not going to be some kind of magic bloodshed, like in those *Left Behind* books. It's going to be dudes killing each other. The idea that the messiah is going to be this sweetheart is totally fucking off. There is nothing in Torah that suggests that that is even an ideal way to be a human being. Torah seems to be written under the assumption that, in the world, men make war. That sucks, but that is how it is. God is actually not always just, and if wants to be just, he will be—but mostly, he's just the powerful thing going. Sometimes he tells you to commit genocide, which involves killing children and women, and it's fucked up, but you're supposed to do it because he's God – not because you're supposed to understand it. You're not acting out of love—you're acting out of loyalty.

One of the reasons Judaism is a fascinating religion is because it doesn't play up what faith is supposed to be. Judaism is really about how you behave. Most of the proprietary behaviors are silly, but really, your measure as a human being is based on how you contribute to your community. If you're a shit-head—like if you beat your wife and your kids and you steal from people – but you 'love God in your heart,' that doesn't mean shit. You're still a fucking asshole and God hates you. It's how you behave. On top of that, presumably, faith still plays into the equation—there are a few mentions about how God can see what's in your heart—but that shit is really secondary. Of foremost importance is how you act.

***Christianity—in its contemporary American form—seems to be very concerned with what you believe, not so much what you act on.***

It's weird. The Christian emphasis on forgiveness is really interesting because it's not half-assed. But on the whole, when you attach people to the practical and everyday, you give them the power and ability to revolt, if necessary. Christianity doesn't have that.

If you're saying that you have to behave right, and then there are others who are preventing you from doing right, then you're justified—or should be justified—in revolting. I'm trying to be good in my community, but this guy is preventing me, I'm now entitled to fuck this guy up.

On the other hand, if the message is that all you have to do is *believe* in God, and suffer the world, and then you'll inherit the earth—then you're being told to stay down. That's the poison part of faith. If you're not suffering, faith is a good thing, but if you're a slave or if you're

oppressed, and you're told by your religious leaders to put your head down and love God, that's just helping you be enslaved and oppressed.

The flip side to this—that might makes right—that's fucked up, too. I think these are just things people should be thinking about. There is this idea that violence is always wrong. That's bullshit. It doesn't account for the fact that there are people in the world who don't care if violence is wrong, and they'll inflict it on you. There's this zero-tolerance policy for kids—if some guy comes up and knocks you down, you can't even hit him back – you're both expelled. That's bullshit. It solves nothing. All it does is create a bunch of people who do the same thing when they're older.

***Do you have plans to ever write anything else as large—or as comprehensive—as The Instructions?***

The one area in my life where I don't have to make decisions for the future is what I'm going to write. I've stuck to that really closely since I was a kid. If I sit down to work, I'm just going to write. If that thing turns out to be a fucking thousand-page book and it takes me forever, then that's how it happens. If it doesn't happen, then it doesn't happen. Maybe I will write another long book like that, who knows? I'd like to write a short novel, since I've never done it, but other than that, these are minor things. I just keep writing.

ADAM LEVIN: EXCERPTS FROM *HOT PINK*

## TWO CONVERSATIONS

A false start. It meant something to the man it didn't mean to the woman, something it didn't mean to normal people. But that, in itself, was not the problem. It wasn't what drove her mad, so to speak. What drove her mad—"Drove her mad," *so to speak!* She thought—came three days later, in their next conversation, when she'd called to clarify the first conversation, a brief conversation, the one in which he had said A FALSE START, which brief conversation she had since realized to have been too easy for him (she had, she'd realized, been too easy *on* him), *too easy* in the sense that she had not *shed tears* till she got off the telephone, had *exhausted all her powers* via *holding back tears* and *controlling her voice and the sound of her breathing*, telling herself – while still on the phone—that weeping, hers, was *what he was after*, and therefore weeping would mean *her defeat* when that hadn't been, she now reflected, the case at all, but *quite the opposite*, for *failing to weep*, the woman saw now, had signaled to the man her *ready acceptance* of all that he'd said about A FALSE START, which nullified in him any *sense of obligation*, any sense of *his duty* to offer her *comfort*, to *clean up the mess that he'd made* because *mess?* where *mess?* *mess* what? what *mess?* No one had *wept*. No one had *argued*. No one had done anything except to *accept* and stammer about A FALSE START once or twice, and when she called him up, *weeping*, three days later, what *drove her mad* was the way he made it sound as though she was betraying—in calling him, *weeping*, three days later—an agreement they'd made, the way A FALSE START had become *THE FALSE START*, as in "but we already discussed *THE FALSE START*."

# BILLY

I had this mutt once. Medium-to-large. A gift from my father, a schmuck. I forget the mutt's name. It had a few before it died and I can't remember what we finally settled on. When we dropped its corpse into the ditch we'd dug, my schmuck father said a prayer to his schmuck higher power in which the mutt's name as mentioned, and I remember feeling confused for a second because the name wasn't the name I was expecting to hear. Whether my father'd used the mutt's most recent name and I'd been expecting to hear an earlier name or it was the other way around I couldn't say, but it sounded all wrong. It sounded wrong to my brother, too, now that I think about it, so that probably means Dad used an earlier name because my brother was not sentimental—he was a mental cripple—and he corrected my father's prayer and my father gave him a kind of schmuck type look, though he let the correction stand, and Billy piped down.

Billy was also one of the names of the mutt, not just my brother, who was, understandably, confused by this fact, though it was my brother himself who named the mutt Billy. Billy, now that I recall it, was the mutt's original name, and that, in fact, is part of how the mutt came to have so many different names.

I said the mutt was my mutt but the mutt started out Billy's mutt, who Dad brought the mutt home for and then told to name it. When Billy named it Billy, I said it was a bad idea and my dad said it wasn't up to me. What he actually said was, "Not your dog," which is how a schmuck talks, but what he meant was what I had just said he said—wasn't up to me—and then he left the room and ate some cold chicken.

A few days into having a mutt with the same name as him, which made Billy-my-brother-more confused and scared than usual, Billy said he wanted to change the mutt's name, and my dad said he could not change the mutt's name. Said he had to stick with his choice, honor his commitments, the schmuck, though what he actually said to my brother when my brother, mentally crippled, said he'd like to change the mutt's name was, "Can't. Made your bed." I made, in response, a kind of fuck-you face, and my father told me, "Not your dog," so I offered my brother a dollar for the mutt and Billy sold me the mutt and ran off to buy candy and I gave the mutt its second name, which I don't remember, and my schmuck father gave me a kind of schmuck-type defeated look, so I gave the mutt a third name, right then and there, and received another schmuck look, and I gave the mutt a fourth name, and so on, until the schmuck stopped

looking at me, which didn't take that long.

The thing about it was, though, I didn't much want the mutt and had bought it only to help out Billy and get at the schmuck, and had, in fact, later offered to sell the mutt back to Billy, newly named, for just a penny, but Billy didn't much want the mutt either, poor mutt. Poor schmuck. Poor Billy. Poor me.

A couple days later, the mutt got sick with something I can't remember, something painful we couldn't afford to treat, and the schmuck, who said it was my responsibility, would neither let me handle his un nor would he shoot the mutt himself. I had enough of this schmuck ruling over me and Billy, and I did what I had to. I raised up a shovel and ended the mutt and raised up that shovel and turned to the schmuck and told him some things had to change around here and I told him he would help us bury the mutt.

# IMPORTANT MEN

As he approached me on the sidewalk, I noticed the important man had the kind of face that would look exactly the same with or without a mustache. He was carrying a black-lacquered cane with a diamond-stuffed handle and I envied him his cane. I imagined thumping my fingertips against it, the sound that would make, and flipping it upside-down to make believe it was the letter *L*. If the cane were mine, I would pretend it was a long-barreled pistol with a diamond-stuffed grip. I would holster it in the elastic of my jockey shorts and have friends. When I came across a friend, I would pull the cane out of the holster and point it, say: "Gotcha." I could do that as many times as I wanted, and it would never stop being a good joke. I would be what the call "a character." People would want to see more of me. They would say of me, "That character! Always with the cane he pretends is a pistol!" and exchange intimate glances with one another, then wave the whole thing off with both hands and decide to lunch together.

"Lunch?" one would say. "Let's," would say another.

The important man continued in my direction, until he was right in front of me. I made myself sideways so he could pass. My fingernails grazed the button of his epaulet. "Pardon," he said, and he was walking away.

Just like the last one.

"Come back," I said.

He waved me off and sped his pace. I went after him. I walked beside him. The head was unbearable that day. I was sweating.

"I have something to ask you," I said.

"He said, '*What's that?*'" but he kept walking, like he was scared of me, like I had done something wrong or something dangerous. I was going to ask him if he ever imagined his cane was a pistol, and then say, "Me too," and we would have something in common. But I knew that would scare him and I didn't want that to scare him so I said something *I* thought was scary so we could both be scared together. I said, "The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground!" and made a movement with my shoulders like I would hit him, and he flinched. That was when another man (bearded) came along. This second man owned the hat shop that we were standing in front of, but he was not wearing a hat and he said to me, "What the fuck? Who the fuck?"

"I don't know," I said. I was ashamed to look at him. I looked at the display window. It was

full of breastless, earth-tone mannequins in bowlers and derby hats sitting in folding chairs around a square table, one on each side. There were playing cards affixed to their hands by means of an invisible adhesive, probably the quick-dry liquid variety. There wasn't a single thumb between the four of them and this second man expected me to pretend they were playing poker.

"Who the *fuck*?" the second man said again.

I imagined he knew I didn't understand him and that was why he said it the second time. I think he gave up on me after that.

Still watching the mannequins, I made a thinking face to appease him. Then I started thinking. I thought: They do not have ears and they do not have hair, yet their hats do not all over their eyes- there must be adhesive. I thought: But a liquid adhesive of the kind of affixing the cards to the hands would, if used on the heads, irreparably gum up the fibers in the hats and ruin their potential to be sold well. No, I thought, a liquid adhesive would not be appropriate at all, and therefore the mannequins must have strips of adhesive *tape* between their heads and their hats, and these strips must be looped into O-shapes. Oh, you're stupid. You thought you were smart, but you're stupid, I hate you. There is double-sided tape for sale at stores. There is the law or parsimony. Nothing need be looped into O-shapes—not when both sides adhere with equal potency. You should have thought of that first, but you are not elegant.

The second man said, "Go," and pointed me across the street. I crossed the street and straddled a construction horse. I watched the second man talk to the first. They spoke like friends. The second man set his hand on the shoulder of the first man and the first man leaned on his cane toward the second man and soon they were laughing. When they laughed, I could see the steam of their gasps converging. I thought: Maybe they don't know each other at all and the second man is the greatest salesman who ever lived, is selling the first man a hat without the first man even knowing that he is being sold a hat. I thought: I wonder if the notice the way their seam is converging. I wonder if the second man does but the first man doesn't if knowing how to foment this convergence is one of the secrets to being as great a salesman as the second man. Convinced of it, and convinced that the second man, despite his canelessness, was important, possibly even more important than the first, I set out to find someone to mingle steam with. This is not as easy for me as it is for others. It is not as easy as it should be.

I walked a block and found two men talking. I approached the younger one and said, "What the fuck? Who the fuck? Who the fuck? Go." It didn't work.



# MANIPULATING THE MICRO COSMOS

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE BICKFORD  
CONDUCTED BY JON-ERIK MEANS

When I arrive at Bruce Bickford's house I notice a series of cardboard CAS'L's (castles of Bickford's mythology) lined around the tables and shelving in the living room, a space mostly stacked in art projects. Tiny glyphs carved from thick paper and cardboard are scattered near the stove. A handwritten note is taped near a wall outlet: ELECTRIC MIDGET GLORYHOLE. Various paint stippled paper bags, now folded down into boxes, hold what looks like 20 different pairs of reading glasses. As we talk, Bickford sits cross-legged on a small trampoline, next to an enormous dictionary, drawing on a small light box and holding his coffee in his free hand. Though he tells me he rarely reads, he has also mentioned reading this dictionary on a daily basis. I ask questions and those that don't interest him will receive little replies if any. He wears a large parka and periodically shoves firewood into the stove. When I first visit Bickford in late January, I only glance through his hundreds of folders of stories, barely skim his garage studio filled with sheets of clay figures and props. When I ask him if there is any order to the space, he shakes his head.

Bruce Bickford is a privately prolific artist who has been creatively active for most of his life and came into public attention with his animated contributions to Frank Zappa's seminal concert documentaries, *Baby Snakes* and *The Dub Room Special*. Bickford worked as Zappa's animator in the LA area between 1974 and 1980. Zappa also championed Bickford's work outside of his concert documentaries and released *The Amazing Mr. Bickford*, a now out of print videotape featuring Bickford's early works and Zappa's orchestral music. Bickford has stayed creatively

active with animation, writing, and illustration since his career with Zappa. Among his films completed are *Prometheus' Garden* and the more recent *CAS'L* film which has been screening at public appearances. He and his late father George are also the focus of Brett Ingram's excellent documentary *Monster Road* and Bruce is featured again in the follow-up, *Luck of a Foghorn*.

Bickford's work disturbed and fascinated me when viewing *Baby Snakes* for the first time: cityscapes steeped and crumbled and came boiling together into faces. Bodies ripped apart in thick tearing noodles and then congealed into choirs of orifices and undulating organs. Everything is in motion, evolutionary and repulsive. Viewing these scenes now as an adult I'm fascinated by the intense attention to detail and movement in all things that Bickford activates; every piece of every frame is a volatile agent and it's difficult to grasp the full spectrum. This attention to detail amazed me and even with many of the earlier films, the 16mm home videos, Bickford shows an astounding level of mastery over the cinematographic composition and inhabitation of sculpted clay. This ability to translate motion into art is just as effective in his illustrations; browsing through his recent drawings I see thick, rolling swaths of noxious fog, skewered bodies writhing over flames, lowriders impaling with hood-mounted Pachuco crosses, lines of music infecting the landscape. The restlessness is potent and ubiquitous; there is an angling to objects that seems to drag them from one state to the next without pause.

Bruce is currently at work on two graphic novels for Fantagraphics. Most recently he has been focusing on a vampire graphic novel that involves a host of vampire interest groups, an odor-based, lunar possession, and the rebellion of Beelzebub's imps among many, many other secretive and bizarre elements. His other scheduled novel is centered on portal-jumping pirates. Bruce continues to make appearances throughout the world, though gallery showings are sparse and most of his time is spent focusing on the art itself, not the promotion.

**ANOBIUM:** *How did you meet up with Zappa originally?*

**BRUCE BICKFORD:** I went down in '73 looking for work and kept going around town until I found an animation house that did stuff for *200 Motels*. They put me in touch with the guy who did album covers for Frank, Cal Schenkel. He arranged for me to meet Frank. It seems like they had about ten guys there and they all watched my barroom scene, the thing that later ended up in *The Amazing Mr. Bickford*, I showed them that and some line animation and a few other little 16mm films.

***Were you friends with Cal Schenkel or was he just an acquaintance that helped you find Zappa?***

I thought I was gonna be working with him, but it never happened. There just wasn't enough organization in that whole setup.

***When you were doing stuff for Baby Snakes and The Dub Room Special, would Zappa give you kind of an outline for how he wanted you to make it? Or were you given a lot of freedom?***

Stuff for *Baby Snakes* he kinda gave me some outlines but it didn't work quite the way he wanted even though he did use it in the end. But he wanted me to do it over. He was going to give me timing sheets but never did so most of the time I just went off on my own. But I tried to work his images and themes into things.

***I know in the movie he's shown in the studio most of the time you're on camera, too, but was he in the studio for much of the time that you were animating?***

No. Rarely ever.

***What was the last piece that you worked on for him?***

Probably something for *Baby Snakes*. There was the cell animation in *Baby Snakes*. You know that stuff? That stuff was really hard. Very time consuming. Took about a month to draw the original thousand frames, but then it took six months to paint it.

***And you were working on that by yourself?***

Yeah. And when he found out how long it took to paint it he looked just...just stunned and pissed off. And I said, "Hey. Take a look at it again. I painted *everything*. Every detail in there was painted. And even other stuff between things where there were no lines to follow—I put textures in certain places." He only had a vague understanding of a lot of those things.

***It always sounds like he had pretty strict expectations of how things worked and how people worked for him. Did you guys get along pretty well, though?***

Oh, I've just heard so many stories about things like how—this was later, after I worked for him, in the eighties—how'd they be getting ready to go out on tour, they'd be rehearsing all these

things for days, months, and then he at the last moment says, “No. We’re not going to use any of that stuff. We’re just gonna do oldies.” After he’d put them through all the rigor of these new things they had to learn. See, some people—he liked to change his mind about things, but not tell anyone. Just let them find out. See? That’s power.

*Do you think he did that intentionally or—*

Of course. Well, sometimes he’d forget.

*After all that came out, especially Baby Snakes, were you contacted by a lot of people asking you to work for them?*

You know, not that much because no one knew how to find me, probably. And they still don’t know how. I’m just not very connected with things. I get calls, or people call Brett [Ingram] to get in touch with me and he’ll refer them to me, sometimes. But in general, I’m not hooked in.



***Do you spend time with many people or are you working on your projects most of the time?***

I like to get out and see people but people don't have much time. People I know. Like my oldest friend in town that I hang out with, he works at the UW, well he had some kind of professor thing with music, but he's mainly out playing with bands and stuff. He's just too busy to do anything usually. And the other people I know that I'm interested in, they're just too spread out. So I'm not hanging around with people much. There's a cartoonists meeting in town. These cartoonists will get together. The group kind of fractured and went a number of different ways. A couple of years ago I'd go in there occasionally, just to—but these people, you know, they get together, sit around the big table and draw, do their cartoons. And they'd talk in these one-liners. This was just this particular crowd. One-liners and sound bytes, like cartoon captions. That's the way they relate to each other and I just... that's not me. Often I'd hear some inaccuracies in what they were talking and I'd want to interject the real details but usually I wouldn't because it's just too competitive. When I'd go in there, I'd hardly be able to draw or write anything because the vibes just weren't right. They weren't conducive to me doing anything. I go to coffee places sometimes or just a deli like in the Whole Foods or places like that. I'll bring in my own brew because I don't want to pay for their crummy coffee. And I'll sit there and I'll draw stuff; like I can make a whole one of the rough drawings that I can later trace—I can work out the whole thing sometimes just in an hour and a half. But that's a deal where I'm just there, no one's bugging me and if I overhear the people, that's just a matter of course. Sometimes they're really irritating, but so what? I mean, when they're talking business or they're talking their relationship stuff, it's so banal. It's just grating.

***But you prefer that kind of environment because you can just tune it out?***

It's like...I'm not involved. They're not—well—they are trying to put you through something. They're hoping people can hear about their relationship dilemmas.

***When you were growing up were there cartoons or different characters that you used to draw often?***

When I was around 7, when we still lived in the old house on the other lot, that year we finally started getting *The Seattle Times*, the Sunday paper and that was the first time it had come. And I remember the paperboys came to the door and gave us our first Sunday paper and as they're handing us to it they say, "Don't let the funnies fall out." And I'm thinking, "Funnies?" Because we hardly ever had comics or anything. Anyway, I followed the comics. They were better back then I think. I'm sure they were. But the Dick Tracy stuff, I followed that stuff really closely. I'd watch cartoons every time—we didn't have TV till I was about 9, but before then I'd watch all the cartoons I could at the neighbors'.

*Just anything as long as it was a cartoon?*

Later when we had TV, I was a little more discerning. When the Hanna-Barbera came out with the Yogi Bear and The Flintstones and Top Cat and all that stuff, I wouldn't watch it. After seeing it a few times I realized they were just faking it. They were making it as cheap as they possibly could and it was literally not worth watching. The drawing, the animation, everything.

*In Monster Road you talk about how you take on the feelings of each of the characters you're sculpting. Does that hold true with graphic novels?*

I'm sure. If you want to put a certain expression on someone's face, you have to consider how they're feeling, what they're thinking. A lot of this stuff you don't think out first. It just sorta develops. The person's character develops as you're drawing 'em. You start to see a certain nuance to their expression and you work on that, you bring that out further.

*And that happens even when you have a scene of hundreds of little guys running around?*

Yeah.

*With the Baby Snakes especially I had been wondering if it was all happening organically without a pre-determined structure to it.*

Most of it. Something like the Greggery Peccary scene, I was working from kind of an outline where I tried to do it scene by scene. Zappa thought that the Greggery Peccary character was just too flat. It's like when he was moving in through the steno pool, he wanted him to be more expressive and flirting with the stenographers and everything. He said he could get me a timing sheet, but he didn't do it.

**That was a detail he had asked you to alter and you never altered it, it just stayed the way you had created it originally in the final version?**

Yeah.

*Were there other instances like that?*

Oh, I could dredge up quite a bit of stuff but I'm really not in the mood for it right now. Look, I

was as incompetent as he was. But he should have at least gotten a production manager, someone to keep me on line, to keep me doing the stuff I was supposed to do. Occasionally he would talk about getting a professional photographer to work with me, but he was always changing his mind or just reversing himself. Well, basically, no matter what it was, it had to look like it was his idea.

***On other projects like Prometheus' Garden did you have any sort of program manager?***

No. You know, I don't mean to put Zappa down too much because I still like a lot of his music, but when it came to making movies I messed up really bad. Right in the beginning, before I signed the contract, I should've demanded that I be able to direct the movie. That I have full control over the look of it and everything because he was really limited as far as movie stuff goes. Like overuse of close-ups, a number of things. In the full-length version of *Baby Snakes*, the final scene was just him riding in his limousine down the street. It had to have been at least a minute. Just a shot of him riding along like, okay, he's done his concert and now he's riding off into the night. That's just not the way to do *anything*. It was just indulgent. Just to have a shot where nothing's happening for a minute, that's just like saying, "Hey, look at me. Doesn't matter even if I'm doing nothing. It's noteworthy enough to look at." That's all that shot was doing.

***What are some of your favorite Zappa albums?***

After 1980 I lost track of it. I haven't heard much of it since then. And he probably did about as many after 1980 as before. I don't know. I like his early ones mainly. I like *Bongo Fury* quite a bit. Back in like '75 or whenever that was, he loaned me a little cassette player and occasionally he gave me a little cassette to play and I had *Bongo Fury* on one. I'd listen to it with the lights out sometimes I liked it so much.

***In Monster Road you talk about how irritated you used to get by people making noise. I was wondering if you overcome that irritation and if you're affected the same way by music.***

Any kind of noise. Like the neighbor's dog barking. Unnecessary noises bother me. I have to avoid certain music. Most of it. You know, when *Joe's Garage* came out that was the last year I was down there. I was living in Topanga—well, once the main rock station in LA played the whole thing. They played all three LPs over a couple of days and I think I listened to the whole thing but I just couldn't get interested. Oh, well I was interested, but I just couldn't get satisfied with it. And he kept coming in with this whispering stuff, the central scrutinizer—it was lame. You could have someone whispering just once, like *We're Only In It For The Money*. Once is enough. But this kept happening and it was just monotonous. But later I did hear a cover band,



Project Object, they were playing a place about a year ago in Georgetown. They invited me in; I didn't even have to pay to get in. But they did one song off *Joe's Garage*, the Outside Now song, about a guy who's getting out of prison. And it sounded *great*. The guys explained to me how it was in 11/4 time signature and it just sounds totally great. I was kinda familiar with it. I must've heard it when I was in Germany at the Zappanale three years ago.

***How long have you been using the CAS'L' and Uplands imagery and environments?***

I started the CAS'L' stuff back in the Zappa days. It was because of a song of his called "The Torture Never Stops" where there was a dungeon of despair and so I designed a CAS'L' over that dungeon. The Uplands I can't remember—I think it was sometime in the early '90s when I came up with that name for a place up in the hills. But more recently I've concentrated more on a part of the Uplands that is further south of the original parts, slightly lower. That's where there's more of a stable community. The upper parts of the Uplands had mostly a ghost town, which a character got restarted; he made a lot of businesses just out of old existing buildings on the main street. But the new Uplands material is about a whole kind of a community where everything, where technology kind of ended in 1960 and modern technology just doesn't exist there because they're shut off from the lower lands, which would be, you know, this metropolitan area around here—the Seattle area and the suburbs, whereas the Uplands are back behind the hills away. Back in an area around the CAS'L'.

***Is the CAS'L' in the Lowlands or in the Uplands?***

Well, the CAS'L' is in the Green Valley which the Green River runs through and that's towards the upper stretches of the river.

***In the vampire graphic novel you incorporate different historical groups like the Hellfire Club and the Vikings; in what other ways does history influence your created environments?***

Well, the Vikings were the first European colonists to come to the Uplands, but they also were the first people to establish an area where the CAS'L' is. They tried to use the powers in the CAS'L' area to build a CAS'L', but when the Conquistadors and the Aztecs came there and joined with the Vikings, then is when the real CAS'L' was built.

***And that area was used exclusively for torture?***

No, that stuff came later with some inquisitors that got a place there.

*And were they a totally unrelated movement?*

Yeah, they were just newcomers and since then there's been other newcomers who have established cults in the CAS'L and in the Uplands.

*Was there another feature-length animation you recently completed aside from the CAS'L film? Tales of the Green River?*

Oh, that's one of my stories.

*So that's not a movie?*

It could be. It's just one of these things that, you know, I've gotten it written out so you could probably read it, whereas most of my stories are just really rough. Most people wouldn't even be able to read it.

*So do you have hundreds of stories in there then?*

Couple of hundred just right in those three boxes. And actually all of these stories I'd like to get transcribed, but there's too many. But there's one, a Haitian story, about a—it's like—are you familiar with the James Bond movies? You know what the first one was?

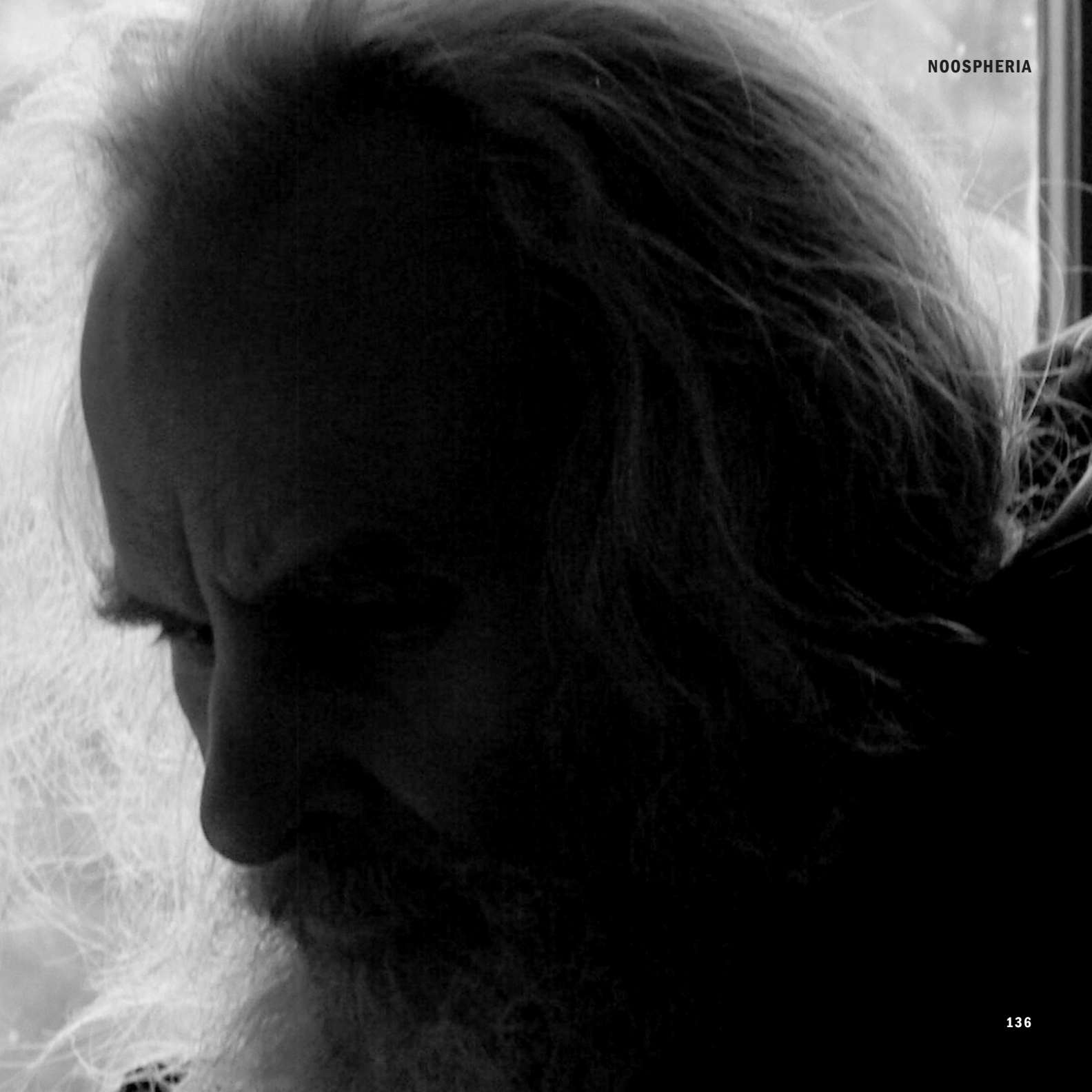
**Dr. No.**

This would be that story but it'd be in Haiti rather than Jamaica, just because I think there's a richer environment and more possibilities of weirdness in Haiti. I think it'd be modern, but it'd be the same story. You remember when *Dr. No* was knocking the missiles out? Well that could be the same story like we have too—our space program failed, our technology's breaking down—they had to go back to more primitive missiles. And so *Dr. No* starts doing that again. But there's plenty of other stuff in the story. Well, y'know, that Haitian story is one I wanna get transcribed because I think Spielberg would be interested in it if I could get something to him. Ten years ago I heard that he was planning to do a remake of *Dr. No* and I just can't imagine he wouldn't like this story. And I has it worked out this would probably be like a four hour movie with an intermission. Well, that's my grandiose plan for it, because there's enough material in it. There's genetic engineering stuff and voodoo and dictators and a whole lot of evil stuff.

*Do you have more movie ideas along those lines?*

Plenty of them. There's plenty of really thick folders in those boxes. Like there's a story about





OJ and Clinton. There's this guy who's the idiot bastard son. You know that Zappa song? He's that guy and he's like the main character. He comes into LA, but then he gets diverted to this place in Wyoming where secret societies can indulge in devious things and Clinton and OJ are there. Then later the guy gets involved with OJ's family in LA, as like a houseguest, like Kato. It'd be cool to get OJ out of jail on a work release to be in this movie.

*So the OJ/Clinton project would be a movie too?*

Yeah.

*So all those story ideas are movies?*

Yeah, that's what I'm always thinking when I'm writing them.

*At first I thought you were talking novels.*

Well, they could be. A lot of them could be novels also. Like maybe that Haitian story, I could just write it as a novel, even though it's a treatment for a movie.

*Are you incorporating much of the Lowlands and Green Valley in the pirate graphic novel?*

No, none of it. It's totally separate. But it is in the previous one, the one I was originally working on that I haven't finished. The story about the crime-wave and the aliens getting involved. The one I did with colored pencils. That starts in the Uplands, the first scene, and from there it goes clear across the country. It's a graphic novel that I started, but didn't quite finish. I had to put those other two on hold to do the vampire one. I had to put that one on hold in order to do [the vampire novel]. It was pretty far along. I had about 400 pages, maybe. This one is a totally different environment. It's in the Indian Ocean mostly. It starts out in LA.

*How does it get from LA to the Indian Ocean?*

Oh, several ways. The first time they go on planes, but the second time they go through a dimensional warp in Santa Monica. There's an icon that one of them brought back with him the first time, the face of one of the deities in that area that can provoke an entryway into another scene.

*Can you explain a little more of the plot of the colored pencil graphic novel?*

It starts with an attempted home invasion in the Uplands. A UFO came at the same time and

when it was investigating, it was just being curious about what was going on at that house. When the criminals fired at the UFO, the UFO retaliated on them and drove them away but at the same time it got the notion that these criminals were against them and so they launched an operation that would subvert the criminal culture. The criminal's culture lead them to crooked politicians so they went across the country making problems for crooked politicians as well as the criminals.

*Is that at a different point in the Uplands' timeline outside of the vampire novel?*

No, it's a current timeline.

*Is there any crossover between the vampire and UFO/criminals story?*

No, except for the setting. Where the crime story began is the same place. In the vampire story there's almost as much activity going on in the Uplands as there is in the Lowlands, where the picnic eventually takes place.

*Are there more settings like the Uplands that are more recent that you've been working with?*

There's many different stories and many different locations in my story file over there. There's one on the east coast—you know, some times I don't know how many of these stories I should give away ahead of time because there are a lot of people out there who are just waiting for a story or a title or anything to come along that they can find out if you've got it copyrighted already, and if not, they might do something with it; if they like the title or if they like the story idea...this has happened to me a few times already. I had an idea for a story called Terminal Euphoria and I'd done a lot of writing on it; it was one of my thicker folders of material. But then a friend of mine, a musician, was over here and he was doing a song based on the title Terminal Euphoria. I must admit I didn't come up with that title myself; I got it from a 1969 *Esquire* magazine. I remember reading it back in '69, when I got out of the service that summer, and this article was called "Terminal Euphoria." It was something about the end of the Summer of Love in San Francisco in Haight-Ashbury and how things turned into a nightmarish scene with meth being the main drug rather than LSD, just the terrible condition that the meth-addicts were getting into; terrible physical and mental condition and all the crime that resulted from it. And these meth-heads were just on terminal euphoria—they just wanted to have their euphoria till it ended. Or till life ended. And so I had a story about that. It's like—oh, just like last week when I heard about *Hunger Games*, I realized that was similar to my story, though I'd never heard of it. I don't read books, stories, anything. I'm just such a slow reader, I can't read much. I'll read a magazine article occasionally or a book on a subject I'm researching. I'll read when it's neces-

sary. But ordinarily I don't read fiction because it just takes me too long and actually I'm more interested in my own stories than someone else's, so I work on those. But the Terminal Euphoria story that I came up with ten years ago is about a future in this country, the future in a shattered land, where the country split into three: East Coast, West Coast, and the Middle. This story takes place in the Middle section where there's warlords and religious leaders and military and politicians. The main idea the leaders have is they want to maintain their kind of culture of consumption and consumerism and everything, that's their terminal euphoria. And that title, which I got from the *Esquire* magazine—I found that same issue of *Esquire* at the swap meet here seven or eight years ago and I think that's around when I started working on that story. When this friend of mine was over here, he was doing some music about that story and he put it on the Internet and before long he told me somebody else had taken that title, *Terminal Euphoria*, and turned it into the title of their website, registered it and everything. I didn't have it registered at all. And this other website was some kind of an S&M site. That amount of technology to just get their thing registered in their name—anyone who's ambitious will do that. You know, it's a very base and creepy kind of ambition, but that doesn't matter to them. They just do it. They feel fully justified because they grew up that way, being selfish and just lurking there for anything that comes along. That, to them, is fair prey. There are millions of those people in this country. A lot of them, they become identity thieves—I can't even estimate how many of those people there are, but there's lots of them because this country allows it. So anyway, I'm not prone to divulging all of my stories.

***What are some of the materials for the construction of a basic set for one of your animated films? I saw a hut with a thatched roof and a lattice, where every piece of the house is fully designed.***

With those huts, the walls and the latticework was woven clay, woven like a basket kind of effect, but more space between the strands. The roofs of those huts were paper. I tried to make a thatched roof effect just by cutting a lot of paper into shreds and then laying them over each other in a thatched roof kinda way, but it doesn't look anything like a real thatched roof. It's much rougher and more rustic. But a lot of sets are just cardboard and if I want to put clay fixtures on the cardboard, moldings and sculpted pieces of masonry and stuff, then I have to glue wire armatures onto the cardboard and then the clay would be fitted onto the wire so it would stay there.

***All the construction and sculpting techniques are self-taught?***

I never went to art school. Any books on making things like that didn't really ever pertain to the materials I was really using. But it wasn't hard figuring those things out.



***When did you first get started with animating and filmmaking?***

Oh, '64 I did my first stop-motion.

***Was that before the service?***

I was in the Marines from '64-'69. But I was never in what you'd call combat, though it was dangerous at times. In '68, when I went to Vietnam, I came rather close to getting shot one day. I'd only been there two weeks and I saw these bullets coming from across the river. There'd been a big firefight going on over there all day and these rounds were coming from a distance so they'd slowed down enough that you could see them. What you could see was a vapor trail in the air behind them, but it was gone instantly. It was just a swish. You could hear a hiss and see this wisp of the vapor and then it was gone. But you knew exactly what it was because it coincided with all the gunfire and everything. Guys all over the base were – I don't know if they were being shot at, it might've just been stray rounds, but there were a lot of people noticing that same effect that day. That was the only day I remember that happening.

***How long were you in Vietnam?***

11 months. It would've been 13 months, but my enlistment was up. I had to go to the company office and tell them, "Hey, my enlistment's almost up. You've gotta send me back." And they did. Maybe if I hadn't gone in, I'd still be there.

***When you got back from the service you came back to Seattle first and then you moved down to southern California?***

I went down there in '73 to look for work and I finally met Zappa and it was a year later he called me back and then I moved down there. I did some more animation in the year between.

***In the period between moving to California and being back from the service, you were mostly working on films?***

It was my job. My mom let me stay here. She fed me. I didn't have any responsibilities. I tried to be nice. There were a lot of family problems, but my mom somehow put up with it. She wasn't easy to put up with at times. Neither of my parents were. I still have problems from my parents, other family members, that I haven't been able to shake. But all I can do is say, "So what?" It still matters to me, but it shouldn't need to. I sometimes remember a song by Don Henley. His song was "Get Over It" and – well, that's what I try to tell myself sometimes. Get over it.

*Do you feel like you've been able to make progress with accepting some of the stuff from the past?*

Not yet. But I've gotten so many stories. Recently I've been thinking about a new one. A story about when I was in high school and just the creepy way kids acted then and all the young love aspects of things. A lot of this could just be based mainly on the people I knew in high school. There was the most popular girl in school and of course in this story she falls for one of the most ignored—let's see, I think she was a senior then—well, she falls for one of the most ignored sophomores. They have some adventures and huge traumas because of rivalries and everything in school. I can dredge up old recollections from high school and even make a story out of that. There's plenty of things to get distracted with. That place in *Monster Road* where there was a bunker—it wasn't right on Monster Road, but it was close. It was a road that branched off from Monster Road. It was down there in Tukwila. The place is gone now, they demolished it back in the late 60s because by the time I got back from the service I never saw it again. I think the Chamber of Commerce had to go in demolish it because teenagers hung out there and had keggers there. I took a couple of pictures down there. There was a hobo who was going by, just going on his way down the tracks. He stopped to get a stick to hang his bag on.

*Do you have any family in the area?*

Not anymore. I have one cousin that lives in town, she's a lawyer. I had like a second cousin who died about five years ago. He was a famous piano player in the area—Lyle Bickford. He was very traditional, did a lot of stuff from the big bands era. He could do it all. He was tremendously talented. Some musicians I've met who knew of him didn't like him at all because I guess he had some influence in the musician's union and they hated him for that.

*Your dad did architecture?*

But then he became a design engineer and went to Boeing.

*Did you learn much from him architecturally?*

Nothing. I'm sure there was something genetic there. Just because he learned the stuff and it got into his genetic structure and then came down to me. Because I can build little houses of clay and make them structural and there are various other things that would take some engineering.



*Was there any clear influence from your mom?*

After she died I found some things in a trunk of old stuff of hers. There was artwork she had done in college. She was gifted. But it was stuff she had never pulled out and shown to us. She was rather modest about it, I think. She wrote one poem about her grandmother's passing that was rather profound, or the one time I heard it read it seemed that way. And she liked to write and she wrote one novel, it was more or less about herself, and my dad finally got me to read it. That was twenty-some years ago. I found a lot of it rather embarrassing. Her language...she had a flair for the dramatic, but for me it always fell short. It always embarrassed me.

*Was it published?*

No. Of course not. It's like my brother, the one that was drunk for years. Back in the early eighties, when he was just at the worst of being a drunk, he wrote a novel. He had my mom type it out for him so he could submit it. I only read a few pages of it; no one would publish something like that. I'm afraid now it's because he had a fire at his trailer a couple years before he died and I guess all his paperwork got burned. Even the novel he was trying to write. But by then, that was many years after he wrote that thing, he was still wanting to be a writer, but there was no way. He had writer's block and his mind was gone from the alcoholism. It was just gone. But that's what he wanted to do. He wanted to express himself. And, you know, talking about him I feel bad because he got away with just being so abusive to my parents and they still didn't kick him out. He should've been stopped. It should've been prevented, all of his bad behavior. But I've known another of those people, alcoholics. The law can't touch them because they haven't done anything illegal.

*Were any of your other brothers creatively inclined?*

My younger brother was. He could paint...he could draw some. He could've been fairly good but he just lost his whole will to live. I read something he wrote when he was about 17 or 18, just a little brief thing about going on a camping trip. And his letters, just the very few of them I remember, like from when he went to Alaska—he could write okay. And I've got some writing that my oldest brother did. It was probably just a typing assignment, he just typed out a few scenes that went on here in the early sixties, most of it having to do with cars and mechanical things, some of it about their friends and girlfriends. Even he could write. He could write so you could understand it. But I started writing seriously when I was in high school, or tried to be serious; not much of that survives now. Probably just a few scraps of it because it was so bad. Well, some of my teachers liked my writing, tried to encourage me to go to college. One of them did junior year; she was just about freaking out about it, that I was not interested. I tried, I went to junior college, but I flunked out. No, I quit. But I would've flunked out. After walking out of a

few exams because I had mental blocks—it was the second one, it was in philosophy class. There were these essay questions like “Define the Basis of Plato’s Technology” and I didn’t have a clue. I guess we had assignments to read certain parts of the book but it made no sense to me. Or I must not have read that part, because when I got to that question—a friend was sitting next to me and he said I looked really pissed off right before I left. Before you left you were supposed to leave your little blue exam book up on the counter in front and I just—I was embarrassed that I didn’t have anything to leave there. Maybe the previous time, when I walked out of an English exam because I couldn’t do it, then I was mortified. I was terrified because people would see that I didn’t leave my book up there. But I couldn’t. I was not an academic type after high school. Even high school, in the senior year, up until then if we had a term paper to do, I always did it. Like in history class the year before we had to do something about American history and so I did a report on the Monitor and the Merrimac, because that was something a couple years earlier I had read up on. I was fascinated with them. I even made some clay models of them, variations on them. One of which I still have some pieces of out in the garage, but it wasn’t like the real ones. It just had some aspects to it. I was just fascinated with those southern Ironclads, the way they had kind of a sculpted look to them. Anyway, that was junior year. I got through that just because I had an interest in that part of history. Then senior year we had to write a term paper about—we had to choose a person who was great, why this person was great—and I couldn’t do it. I didn’t turn one in and I got a D that quarter. So my problem with my academics had started even before I tried to go to junior college.

*Are there certain images and environmental shapes that you’ve been using in many of your pieces?*

As far as environments go, there’s probably anything you could want, and if there isn’t, I could probably come up with something. It just takes awhile to establish an environment, to put the right details in, to make it seem real. Because in my opinion, detail is what really makes something real. Van Gogh had a saying, he would just define his outlook in art; he said, “Sublimate the ordinary or the obvious and accentuate the essential.” It was something like that. And I think that meant with his expressionism or his impressionism—I’ve never been to art school so I can’t even tell you what they call what Van Gogh did, I don’t know the details—but he just defined his work that way. And if I had an expression for my stuff it would be that in detail, one can find the appearance of reality.

*Are there any projects that you’ve done that are intentionally sparse?*

Not intentionally. There’s such a thing as minimal art that a lot of people like, but I think it’s because they’re small thinkers, they lack imagination, or just feel threatened by anything that might make them think. To me it’s uninteresting, there’s nothing there. Or very little. I would

do something minimal, and I think minimal art can be done well, but it takes much more doing than the minimal art that I've seen, mostly. I can't give examples of any of that that I've liked, I've probably seen some, but I can't recall right now. Even to make something minimalist that conveys something takes a lot of work, to just put a few brush strokes down that actually convey an image or a thought or something, it takes a great amount of technique. Much more than most minimal artists possess. But then again I can't say because I don't study those things. I don't go to the art galleries and look at things. I don't look for things like that on the Internet or anything. So I'm not authoritative on the subject, I just know what's interesting to me and those are the things I look for.





coll.

5102

# THE ENEMY

JULIETA GARCÍA GONZÁLEZ (TRANSLATED BY TOSHIYA KAMEI)

I had a reincarnation dream again. I dreamed that I died and came back to life, and that I turned into a rock, a bird, a dog, and a human again. It's not the first time I dreamed about eternity, returning to this world in different, unfinished forms. In my dreams, I don't come back as a perfect soul, full of kindness. My reincarnation is, more than anything else, an endless search. I always reincarnate to look for the same thing and never find it, but now things have changed. My dreams talk to me. Despite all that has happened, they still talk to me. Some time ago, for example, a voice in my dream told me to take down the paintings in my bedroom.

The first time I had such a dream, as if it were the essential epilogue of the dream, a voice told me to paint the walls white. The following day I bought paint and hired a painter who erased the bluish hue of the walls and painted my home white. I didn't dwell on the matter—I just did what I thought was necessary. But obeying the voice in my dreams didn't calm me down.

For about a week I didn't dream anything – or I didn't remember having dreamed. Then I dreamed again that I died, and that it was my body, not my soul, that transformed. My legs were bent double and ended up turning into something I couldn't explain. Before I woke up, the voice intensely whispered in my ear, like the desperate cry of someone who has called us several times to demand our attention while we're distracted. The voice told me to get rid of all the plants in the house.

At first, I ignored what the voice demanded. I stopped thinking about eternity, my eternity, as long as I could. I forced myself to find a reason to heed such a request.

For years I have lived alone, and I have a way with plants. Regardless of their age or background, I can't hold a conversation with humans for long, but I can talk to plants for hours and make them blossom, grow, and overflow the pots.

After thinking about it a lot, after gazing at the new buds of peace lilies and the pointed leaves of figs, I found no reason to sacrifice the miniature forest that gave me welcome every day. I refused to do it. I expected the voice to be insistent. Losing wakefulness, I wanted a conflict; I wanted to be worn out by the nightmares. It wasn't like that. During this time, I lost the ability to sleep. I went to bed early, kept the lights off after sunset, and remained quiet. To bring on sleep, I created a serene mood. After a light dinner by candlelight, I lay in bed relaxing my muscles. I wanted to force myself to dream and remember my past pleasant dreams. But my ability to dream seemed to have atrophied, and it lasted only for ten or twenty minutes. A few hours of fitful sleep, I became exhausted at the end of the night as if I a useless battle had been finally over.

The second Saturday after the voice talked to me, I took out some flowerpots. Starting with the plants with flowers, I put them in the entrance patio. I spent hours looking at them from the window, in a silent farewell. That night I was able to sleep a bit better, even though constant, restful sleep eluded me. The following day I took out the rest of the plants. I left some flowerpots on the street. The rest stayed piled up in the small entrance patio.

The voice talked to me again in dreams. Without realizing it, I became very lethargic. I didn't realize I was asleep and dreaming until I felt a warm whisper tickle my ear. This time I noticed a familiar tone, as if it were the voice of someone I know, someone very close who recited an incomprehensible prayer. It talked about next lives and beings I have never seen. When it finished its absurd canto, the voice told me to get rid of the furniture. "There's an enemy near you," it whispered, and started telling me what I had to take out, throw out, and sell.

I woke with a slight shiver. The voice said I could keep the bed. I got up and looked at the furniture I had to sell or give away; I spent a good part of the morning gathering it at the entrance of my house. I called the young man in charge of collecting garbage and gave him everything. I didn't want to see how he and his coworker took the furniture I worked so hard to buy one way or another. I felt pain: my things disappeared at the end of the street for no spiritual reason, not for this call to the eternal life the voice whispered; what forced me to get rid of all my belongings was fear, the fear that the voice caused in me.

The first night without plants I slept uncomfortably and deeply. While I was asleep, my body seemed to be changing. It was no longer my pale body and turned into someone else's, some indefinite being with a strong presence. But I remember a palpable body that crawled the walls and disappeared through the bars of the window. Asleep, I couldn't tell the gender of the being approaching me, but then it became obvious to me it was a female form. The voice didn't appear at night, even though I waited for new orders and was about to conjure it up. At any rate, the body seemed to be the solidification of the voice that burst into my dreams and had persuaded me to get rid of all my possessions.

Two weeks passed without anything of note happening. My plants seemed to wither next to the entrance door and in the dining room fluff balls formed, which used to be behind the legs of the armchairs. The walls seemed to have grown in dimension and I felt my figure fade away, overwhelmed by so much whiteness and solitude. I got up at dawn, ate some bread with cheese, left for work, and came home at six to stare at the walls. My weekend routine was different: only then could I take care of the plants. I was with them until the natural night was no longer enough and my back forced me to sit on the bed, take off my clothes, and slip between the sheets to induce myself to sleep so that it would show me the next path. Then it happened. It was during one weekend, shortly after dinnertime. While washing the dishes I had just used, I heard a scratching noise from my room. With the tap still running, I ran to see what had happened. It was all white and empty as usual, so I went back to doing the dishes and focused on the sound of falling water. But the noise returned with more intensity. I heard it several times before I decided to leave the kitchen. I went back to my room: there was something stifling in the air.

In the darkness of night, when I was naked under the blankets, the voice returned. It didn't come near my ear like before, but it seized my body. Falling on me, it filled me with whispers changing modulations. It chattered through every corner of my body while I couldn't do anything. It screamed into my mouth and filled my throat with a deep wail; it walked off and returned, laughing in the hollows of my armpits. It entered my nose and ears. Incomprehensible words—maybe incomplete ones—were biting and hurting. I couldn't open my eyes and wake up. The voice stayed until it got tired. Before disappearing, the voice gave me another instruction: I had to place a mirror.

None of the demands surprised me like the one about a mirror. I have always felt reluctant to look at myself. What I see in the mirror resembles so little what I feel, it scares me. Besides, I hate to see the wear and tear on my body.

The only mirror I had then was a small square one I used to glance at myself for a few seconds before leaving for work to check my hair or pluck out stubborn hairs on my chin. The mirror I'm talking about stayed in my purse almost all the time, but I decided to take it out and hang it, on the bathroom wall. The idea of the mirror in the bathroom made me nervous, but at the same time it calmed me.

In the next few days I avoided standing in front of my image. I went into the bathroom only when it was absolutely necessary, and I turned my back to avoid facing my reflection. As it became a routine, I almost forgot about the mirror on the wall. Then, there were small noises in the house that made me constantly look over my shoulder and disturbed me. My nights were filled with incomplete dreams while I couldn't tell what was terrorizing me and my days were filled with half-formed ghosts I couldn't see or hear clearly: inconstant and indefinite sounds.

The voice returned one night. One of my dreams had ended. In the dream, I turned into a zebra grazing in a desert-like place. Two men on my back, I trotted out of the desert, toward an area full of water and potted plants. The men dismounted and thanked me. I saw my own figure disappear slowly and knew the dream had come to an end. Then I heard the voice in a tone

clearer than ever. It said, “You have an enemy in this house.”

Everything the voice had told me so far had frightened me because I couldn’t make sense out of its words. Somehow I waited the last revelation that would show me the way and clear all my doubts and fears. But when the voice spoke that night, I felt terror.

I started watching my back. Entering my house, I checked the door and the corridor to make sure that nothing would slip through behind me. Even though they were empty, I searched the corners for my enemy in order to confront it. I feared it would finish me in my sleep. I wanted to face it when I was awake.

One afternoon I left work early and locked myself in my house as best as I could. I closed the door and windows and stood in the center of the room to wait for its arrival. At dusk I was still waiting. I had to go to the bathroom, and when I returned, I noticed something strange. A figure moved behind me. I turned round quickly, but the floor tiles were straight and still. When I went into the bathroom again, I noticed something move inside the mirror. I lit a candle and walked up to the wall where I had placed the mirror. There, like my reflection, was my enemy. Identical to me in every way, it moved out of sync with me. It stared at me with shiny eyes. With effort, I managed to leave the bathroom. In the room I felt my back arch: the floor was covered with what I had thought in dreams were my reincarnations. It was me turned into a rock and into the shoes of the faceless men I had led to water. There were stones and unknown animals; feathers, holes, and maybe a zebra’s tail, all products of creation no human had helped. When I was looking at it, I heard the voice again. It sounded familiar: the voice was mine.

Now I avoid the rests of the reincarnations that appear in my dreams every night, murmuring things they want me to hear. I try to open a path in this place that each day has more incomplete bits of my dreams, of my past lives. I try to save myself from my enemy. I have the voice locked up in the bathroom and pay no attention to what it says. During a reincarnation dream, I try to keep my mind blank. Toward the end of the fight, I’m waiting for the shards of life scattered on the floor to take, at last, a definite form.

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# WHAT THE

QUINTON HALLETT, COLETTE JONOPULOS, LAURA LEHEW AND NANCY CAROL MOODY

the husband, king of his elegant pink stucco castle,  
naked and drinking cool blue absinthe chased with shots of  
regional St. George, amps the stereo, rotates the stations,  
dances through the bedroom suite in post-Elvis mode, sings,  
*Just a hunk, a hunk of burning love*; the full-length mirror  
taunts him back: *Just a hunk, a hunk of obese and obsolete*

And,

the wife, unable to extend her modest devotion, leaves  
her castle unaccompanied, wide hat brim pulled low to shield her  
from Rodeo Drive onlookers, an assemblage of commoners in too-  
tight orange and yellow tees; I'm generous she tells herself while  
buying a trippy gift for her too-young, too-muscled gardener as if  
he might understand her need to be average, the rigor of her crown,  
a *nouveau riche* weight to bear



And,

their lover, who frequently says, *I'm undone*, is lost in the smog-leavened L.A. haze, the aqueduct greening of this adult-only playground; legs splayed over beach lounger, rusty for having been left out in early-morning fog, their lover demands—*burnishme—pleasureme—finishme*—; the couple threatened with imminent exposure, pays the shut-up money, offers the interloper a sweet king's ransom

And,

I wake amped on absinthe  
a side-winder rotating counter  
intuitive pulverizing the rodeo  
our marriage a pissed off bucking bronco  
your need for apology the corroded  
spigot on a new drilled well  
sputtering elegant excuses  
someone else's clown filling in  
after the fall

And,

you won't even king me  
crown me, almost clock me but  
shove condoms in the generous  
brim of your Stetson, storm  
the saloon door  
extension classes just a Jack away  
cactus words flourish in the double-wide  
rebound in the rigor of our picket fence  
white-washed orange

And,

if smog, splay, char  
were a pleasure

poker chips swindle your atonement

hoping for the greening  
we built a hornet's nest of flames

leaven or burnish

almost rusty—standing on the edge of obsolete  
I go ahead and boot you out

And,

it wasn't exactly fear  
in the stall, rotating around the kingpin's elegant stud  
like it did. More like some obsolete attraction:  
absinthe & molten sugar in the spoon  
over flame. Post-rodeo highs are trickiest  
when amping down after applause whipcracks  
a last regional and the spigot of bucks goes dry.

And,

complicating muscle-memory of such  
cockeyed trips, you persist in wide-bellied lies  
to stifle the felony of our fling stuck behind your lips.  
In contrast or by extension, any modest protest  
on my part spawns an assemblage of orange alerts. If only  
you were capable of a generous snort now and then.

And,

forging ahead, however rusty  
the skills,

you've ransacked the gods of pleasure.

Remember I was never almost a virgin never  
so green or leavened with innocence I couldn't splay

you, spin you nasty, send you undone around the horn

And,

nine days after the rodeo, everyone is still  
as green as absinthe, but you've cranked up the amp  
of self-indulgence, whining to the regional manager  
and anyone else who's got a spare ear that you're  
feeling obsolete, like a king snake  
plugged into a double spigot. Poor post-elegant you,  
(continued)

Hallett, Jonopulos, LeHew & Moody, *What The*  
(continue stanza)

tracking down any dime you think  
you might be able to rotate on,

And really,

who couldn't have predicted that  
*assemblage* would become the name  
of your game? If a thimbleful of rigor  
and that tattooed-orange extension pole of yours were all  
it took to keep a body from making a one-way trip

off the wide brim of the fall's rocky ledge,  
then sure, your modest skill set might pass  
for a generous endowment in the noggin department,

And,

we wouldn't have to contemplate  
the possibility of looking down at the splat  
and splay of you, undone as you'd surely be  
out there on some greening, moss-slick boulder,  
the wet smog of river spume enveloping you  
like a B-movie aura.

Just look at you, your joints gone rusty,  
pleasure the only thing left to leaven you.  
Who's going to ransom you now,  
nothing hanging on your bones but noise  
and burnish, you who thought *almost*  
was a condition to be aspired to,

And,

KATHLEEN ROONEY & ELISA GABBERT

## SOME NOTES ON TECHNOLOGY

Turning your comments off will not silence the masses. Fortunately for you, there *are* no more masses. The technology has destroyed them.

Fifty-three percent of teens would sacrifice their sense of smell to keep their favorite technology, which proves that a) technology is making us stupid and b) something in here stinks.

According to Ursula LeGuin, “there is curiously little *aesthetic* satisfaction to be got from Web-surfing.” But what does Ursula LeGuin know about technology? And who calls it “the Web”?

Did you forget that “high-tech” is short for “high technology”? Being high all the time can make you forgetful.

Technology is not just for humans, you know; primates, dolphins, and crows have all been seen using technology. Of course, they are typically using it wrong.

Marshall McLuhan compared automobiles to mechanical brides. Surely iPhones are digital brides. Surely, to butt-dial has Freudian implications.

Children are more comfortable with new technologies than adults. They are also much more

literal, and know that although “The book is dead” is a common claim, it cannot die for it was never alive. If books could die, only children would mourn them.

John Henry should have challenged the steam drill to a battle of wits. Machines can perform fast operations on multi-digit numbers, but have poor comic timing.

The Greek word *techne* refers to both mechanical solutions to problems and the creation of fine art. But what if your art involves millions of popsicle sticks? Is it an inquiry into the nature of humankind, or the universe, or what? Something about Hume’s theory that causation is in our minds and not the world?

I don’t care if you were drunk; you can’t take it back once you’ve put it on the Internet.

## SOME NOTES ON FAME

*I’m the moon—the original moon—and I look good tonight*, is what the moon thinks. Everyone’s tired of poems about the moon except for the moon and poets. And that’s why there will probably never be an ending, Hollywood or otherwise, when it comes to the moon.

You’ll probably never be famous, so why not shoot for infamous instead? Help! Murder! Police! That kind of thing.

Being good at something is not its own reward; it must be valued by others—that’s how it works. Of course, dying in obscurity was good enough for your ancestors.

The famous rarely age in the familiar pattern of childhood, teenhood, adulthood, old. You can go Peter Pan, Dorian Gray or asymptotically approach 40 but never reach it.

To be a celebrity is to traverse a kind of mirror-world where enemies attack their prey with venomous love. There are few entrances and fewer exits. Your own image begins to estrange you even as it continues to attract others. Suddenly, perfectly normal characteristics – reddish hair, having gone to camp – begin to seem quirky, even distinguished.

A high proportion of the famous, relative to the population, have really excellent tans. They have double the vacation time and make better use of it, never turning down a beverage in a coconut.

Momus says that “On the Web, everyone will be famous to fifteen people.” I know because I follow him on Facebook. I’m going to try to be his friend for real someday—we will make great friends, I know—I can see it.

I don’t want to live forever, I just want to be considered culturally significant by major anthropologists. And while I’m still alive, I want people who’ve never met me to look for my name in phonebooks. I want phonebooks to stick around, so strangers can call me -- the future might be lonely.

You are barely unique, just so you know. And you’re too old to care this much about your birthday. Wake up and smell the overcompensation already.

Famous people smoke and get the subsequent wrinkles surgically removed. It’s a foreign and nauseating sensation, feeling so old but not seeing your face reflect that. It’s like forgetting where you went to sleep, or eating a chunk of butter that you thought was cheese.

One day, someone might show up and try to lure you from retirement for one final job. Be like Sean Connery; stop doing crap.

## SOME NOTES ON DEPRESSION

Depression isn’t relative; things could always be worse, but people who are suffering aren’t always depressed. No amount of attitude adjustment will put the helium back in the balloon. And don’t try taking a depressed person to a party. I’m waiting until I’m 75 to start smoking again, but the depressed person will just light up right there, in front of everyone. Dying of shame is as good a way to die as any.



Life involves carrying an immense burden, derelict and alone. You can call it “sisyphian,” but you don’t have to be Greek to know depression. You don’t even have to know self-recrimination, crushing debt, failing to get the girl, etc. “Happy” people are often depressed.

Humans are but a tick mark in the timeline of the universe. The universe has a color – not a happy color like fuchsia or yellow, but a kind of dirty taupe.

Hearing that other people are suffering too doesn’t make me feel better; I’m depressed, not a misanthrope. A purgation of the emotions primarily through art probably isn’t going to help me either. Nor will getting drunk, but let’s do it anyway.

*Happiness is a choice* is an idiotic thing to say. I was born gay and I was born depressed. So sue me.

I know, I know I’m bumming you out—would you like me better if I put on a bikini and thrashed around in front of a neon American flag? That can be arranged, but I won’t smile while I’m thrashing.

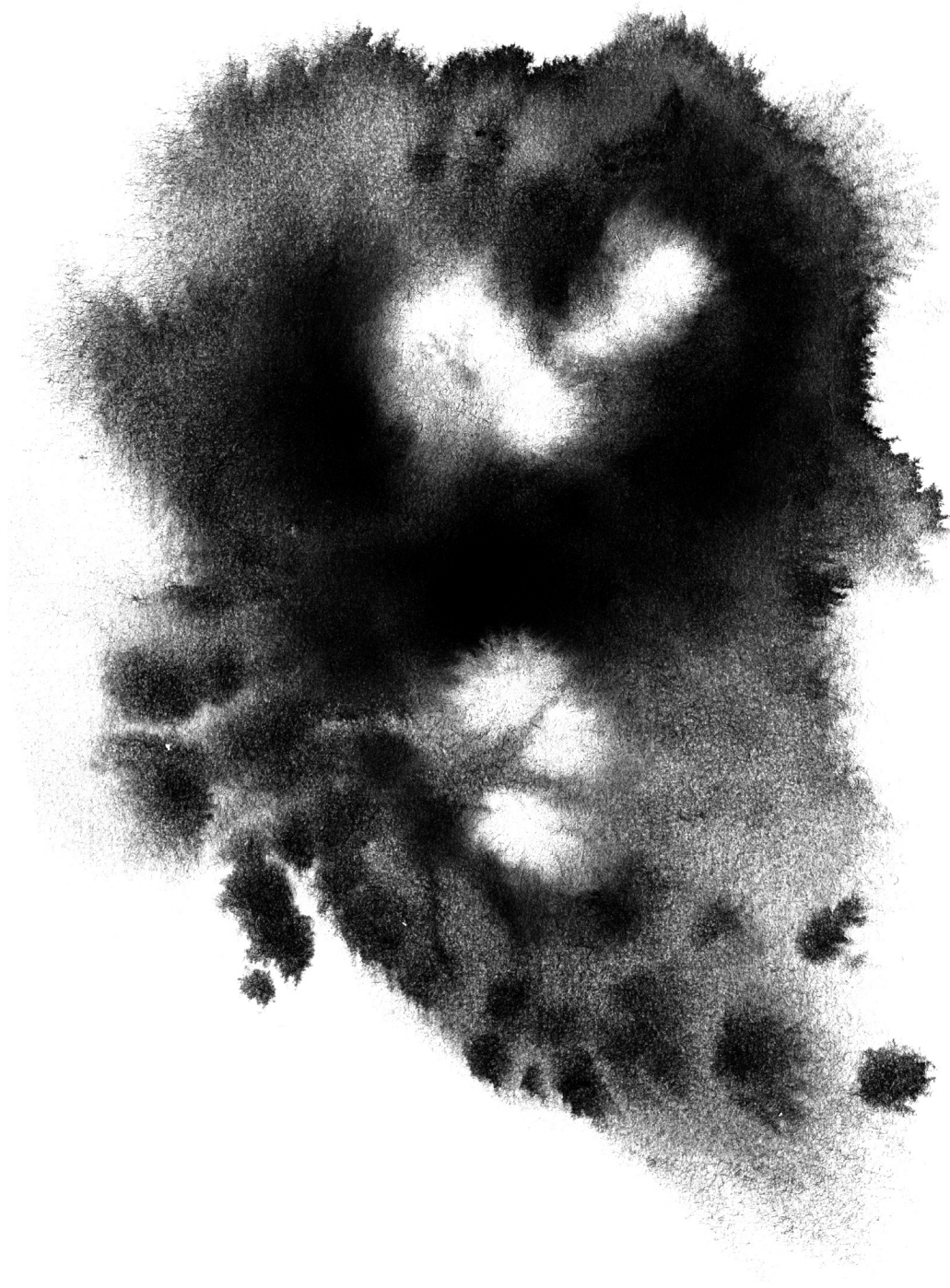
Happy eyes, a self-assured grin, dry palms and a relaxed stance—that’s not what I look like. I have to wear a gorilla suit for work, but even underneath, I’m usually smirking and distinctly suspicious.

*Sports team playing another sports team in sports, YEAH!!!!!!*—I’m typically too depressed to ever really feel that. Team sports are a modern substitute for war, but there are still real wars going on.

The following is sad but true: you kind of have to give your characters money or complete desolation to write a novel. You don’t have to write what you know; just write what makes you feel something -- anything!

It’s dark, so no one will see if I cry. I prefer to cry in movie theaters, in a rainy climate.

If antidepressants made my brain feel like it was getting licked by unicorns or something, then maybe I’d take them. What’s that? They do?



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